

The Feminization of the Church

Why Its Music, Messages and Ministries Are Driving Men Away
by Holly Pivec

The leaders of a new, Christian movement think they've solved a centuries-old mystery: why men are absent from church. But their answer isn't politically correct.

They believe Christianity has become feminized.

There are generally more women than men in every type of church, in every part of the world, according to church growth experts like Patrick Johnstone, author of *Operation World*.

A traditional explanation is that women are more spiritual than men. But the leaders of this new movement suggest that the church's music, messages and ministries cater to women. One of the leaders is David Murrow, author of a provocative book *Why Men Hate Going to Church* (Nelson Books), who spoke with *Biola Connections*.

The result of this feminization is that many men, even Christian men, view churches as “ladies clubs” and don't go — or they often go to please their wives. Murrow's solution is to restore a masculine ethos. Many men's ministers, including some Biolans, agree.

But isn't the reverse true — that the church is controlled by men?

True, 93 percent of senior pastors in America are men, according to evangelical pollster George Barna. But, the majority of attendees in a typical church are women. Barna goes so far as to refer to women as “the backbone of the Christian congregations in America.”

“[I]t's not too hard to discern the target audience of the modern church: a middle-aged to elderly woman,” Murrow said in an interview with Faithreader.com.

The same claim was made by an earlier, more academic book, *The Church Impotent: The Feminization of Christianity* (Spence Publishing Company), by Leon J. Podles, a senior editor of *Touchstone Magazine*. But Murrow's book has had a bigger impact among evangelicals and has been featured by the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post* and the *Wall Street Journal*.

The book has resonated with many men — like Max West, from Payson, Ariz., who wrote in a review on Amazon.com: “[It] opened my eyes as to why I have had such a miserable church experience for the last 30 years.”

Robert York, from Tigard, Ore., wrote: “It has ... helped me identify why I've been so frustrated with church so many times.”

But Murrow said he addressed his book mainly to women, including married women who have been disappointed over their husbands' lack of involvement and to single women who have bemoaned the lack of single, churchgoing men. He said women — who have felt powerless getting men to attend church — actually have the most influence in the churches and, thus, the most power to reverse the feminization.

Even Murrow's critics — who accuse him of promoting a “hypermasculinity” — agree that Murrow has drawn attention to an alarming gender gap.

Mind the Gap

The gender gap began as early as the 13th century, according to some church historians. Others say it began during the Industrial Revolution. Nancy Pearcey, a visiting scholar at Biola, outlines this theory in her book *Total Truth: Liberating Christianity From Its Cultural Captivity* (Crossway Books).

Pearcey said industrialization forced men to seek work away from home, in factories and offices, which created a split between the public and private spheres of life. The public sphere became secularized through the new values of competition and self-interest, and the private sphere came to represent the old values of nurturing and religion, Pearcey said. Thus, religion came to be seen as for women and children and not as relevant to the “real” world of business, politics and academia, she said.

Soon, in churches, women began to outnumber men, Pearcey said. So, male pastors began to adapt churches to their female demographic, she said.

But, interestingly, the gender gap is distinct to Christianity, according to Murrow and Podles. Other religions seem to have a gender balance or even more men than women — including Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism and Islam, they said.

Men’s absence is especially noteworthy, they said, given that men were a strong force in the early church.

An exception to the gender gap may be found in some Muslim countries, like Morocco, where churches of Muslim converts are sometimes almost entirely men, according to Johnstone. But he estimates that, worldwide, the church is 66 percent women.

In America, among evangelical churches, 57 percent of members are women and, among mainline Protestant churches, 66 percent are women, according to a 1998 book *American Evangelicalism* (University of Chicago Press).

The imbalance is greatest in rural churches, small churches, older churches, traditionally black denominations, and in liberal churches, Murrow said, citing research from the 1998 National Congregations Study. It’s smallest in non-denominational and Baptist churches, he said.

About 23 percent of married women attend without their husbands, according to Murrow.

The men who do attend show less commitment, including less participation in Sunday School, small groups and service activities, according to Barna. Men also report less practice of spiritual disciplines like tithing, Bible reading, evangelism and prayer.

Ladies Clubs

Gender differences explain why more women are drawn to church than men, according to Murrow and Podles. They believe these differences are revealed by the Bible, biology, anthropology, psychology and human experience.

Stereotypical gender differences have become so accepted that they are assumed in standardized psychological tests. The MMPI, for example, seeks to measure whether a person is more masculine or more feminine based on the person’s interest in activities that are typically preferred by men or women.

To describe many women, Murrow lists traits like “relational,” “nurturing” and “peace-making.” He describes many men as “goal-driven,” “competitive” and “adventurous.” These differences show up in the types of movies many women and many men like: romantic vs. adventure films, Murrow said. In sum, women thrive when secure, and men thrive when challenged, he said.

But Dr. Gary Strauss, a professor in Biola’s Rosemead School of Psychology, warns that Murrow may be promoting a “hypermasculinity” — the idea that all men should fit the stereotypical norm of a “man’s man,” like the Marlboro Man — tough, outdoorsy and self-reliant.

“He seems to place such a strong emphasis on the hypermasculine image that he doesn’t adequately affirm men of a different type,” Strauss said. “To me, from the hyperfeminine woman, on the one end of the human spectrum, to the hypermasculine man, on the other, and every person in between (assuming psychological health), reflects the breadth and image of God,” he said.

Strauss added that a study by Sandra Bem, of Cornell University, indicates that men (or women) with a blend of both masculine and feminine traits may be more psychologically prepared to handle the range of challenges life presents than “hypermasculine” men (or “hyperfeminine” women).

Yet, because churches have more women, Murrow believes their stereotypical strengths are more valued — and are even seen as more godly. Masculine strengths are often seen as unneeded or as threats to the peaceful status quo, he said.

Johnstone believes the feminization of the church reflects a feminization of the larger culture.

“Our whole society has tended to deprive men of their biblical and creational strengths and empower women,” Johnstone said.

As a result, many people think of church only as a nurturing place that addresses personal needs, Pearcey said. Think: sitting in circles, sharing feelings, holding hands, singing softly, comforting members.

Love Songs and Feminine Spirituality

An example of the feminization of the church is its music. Typical praise songs refer to Jesus as a Christian’s lover and praise his beauty and tenderness. Rarely do they praise his justice or strength, or refer to him as the head of an army leading his church into spiritual battle, like “Onward Christian Soldiers.”

“There’s definitely a trend toward a more intimate music style, like the music from the Vineyard,” said Dr. Barry Liesch, a professor of music at Biola and author of *The New Worship* (Baker Books).

Feminized music concerns Steve Craig (’05), a graduate of Biola’s degree completion program and the director of a men’s ministry of over 400 men at Yorba Linda Friends Church in Yorba Linda, Calif.

“In our men’s ministry, we’re beginning to take out the flowery songs and replace them with the warrior-type lyrics and more masculine things that men identify with,” Craig said.

Mike Erre (M.A. '04) — the director of a men's ministry of over 400 men at Rock Harbor Church in Costa Mesa, Calif. — said feminine expressions of spirituality are more validated than masculine expressions.

“The classic example is the worship pose of the eyes shut and the arms raised in this tender embrace, singing a song that says, ‘I’m desperate for you. You’re the air I breathe.’ Guys don’t talk to guys like that,” Erre said.

A feminized spirituality began in the 13th century, Podles said in his book *The Church Impotent*. One cause, he said, was women mystics who popularized “bridal imagery,” the metaphor of an individual Christian as the bride of Christ. (The biblical metaphor is of the corporate church as the bride of Christ, not the individual person.) They also used erotic imagery to describe their soul’s relationship with Christ. This feminization explains the abrupt departure of men from the church beginning in the 13th century, according to Podles.

Today the bridal imagery continues. Many books, for example, have titles like *Falling in Love With Jesus: Abandoning Yourself to the Greatest Romance of Your Life* (Nelson Impact), released, ironically, by the publisher of Murrow’s book. This may be because Christian publishers know women are the main consumers of Christian books. Seventy percent of customers in Christian retail stores are women, according to Bill Anderson, the president and CEO of the Christian Booksellers Association and a member of Biola’s School of Business Advisory Board.

Even some men’s ministries have encouraged feminine expressions of spirituality, like Promise Keepers, whose advertisements in the 1990s showed men singing, holding hands, hugging and crying, Murrow said. But Promise Keepers is now using more masculine tactics. The advertisements for their 2006 conference, titled “Unleashed,” depict flashes of lightning and say: “It is not about learning how to be a nicer guy. It’s about becoming the powerful man God designed you to be.” Whether their new approach works remains to be seen.

Men’s Ministry — A Church’s Lowest Priority

Another example of feminization is a lack of ministries for men. Women have Bible studies, prayer groups, support groups, teas, and retreats and, of course, children have a plethora of programs. But some churches offer only an annual retreat for men. Yet, this is the opposite of the way Jesus did ministry, according to Murrow. He said Jesus focused on men, knowing that women and children would follow.

According to an oft-quoted statistic from Promise Keepers, when a mother comes to faith in Christ, her family follows 34 percent of the time, but when a father comes to faith his family follows 93 percent of the time.

“It’s very seldom you have a man in church whose wife is staying home,” said Dr. Erik Thoennes, a theology professor at Biola and the teaching elder at Grace Evangelical Free Church in La Mirada, Calif.

So, what will it take to get men into church?

They need to see the greater purpose — their role in the advancing the kingdom of God, according to Erre.

“The gospel that Jesus and Paul preached is revolutionary, and it’s worth giving your life to,” Erre said. “But part of the reason guys aren’t involved is that we’ve sold them a milquetoast gospel. We don’t paint it as big enough — or God as awesome enough — to be compelling,” he said.

Instead, the church often leaves the impression that, once people get saved, their role is to bide time until they go to heaven, Erre said.

“If men think they’re going to church to check off a box, that leaves them totally uninspired,” said Danny Wallen (’88, M.Div. ’93), a director for Every Man Ministries in Trabuco Canyon, Calif. Wallen was raised in a Christian home, but said he was bored by church into his adult years. Looking back, he realizes he didn’t see purpose.

Also, many church service opportunities are geared for women — like working in the nursery, teaching children, cooking and hospitality. So, many men feel their options are limited to ushering, directing parking, or sitting on a committee — activities that might not allow them to use their skills or challenge them.

When men can’t contribute, they feel worthless, according to Gentry Gardner (’83), the founder of Sure Passage, a men’s ministry in Colorado Springs, Colo.

“Once they feel discouraged, they pull back and disconnect,” he said.

Even professionals who join church committees, like a building or finance committee, often complain that the skills they contribute to the corporate world — like taking risks, making hard decisions, and thinking outside the box — aren’t welcome in many churches, whose governing boards tend to play it safe, according to Murrow. As a result, less gets accomplished, which can be frustrating to men who are results-driven, he said.

For example, some businessmen might suggest that a church cut an ineffective program that is costing time and money and replace it with a more effective one. But inefficient programs often remain because a more feminine value — of not hurting people’s feelings — wins out.

The reason younger churches typically have more men than older churches may be because more of men’s gifts — like vision casting and risk taking — are needed until a church becomes settled.

One way Murrow’s church involves men is through an automotive ministry that takes donated vehicles, fixes them, and gives them to single mothers and the working poor. A side benefit is that men develop friendships with other men in the context of doing things together, which is more natural for them than sitting in a circle talking — the typical church format, according to Murrow.

Social justice ministries — that allow men to use their skills to help the weak and provide interaction with business and politics — are especially appealing to men, Podles said.

Craig said mission trips are exciting for many men in his church because they offer challenge, adventure and specific goals: “like construction projects, where they can get their hands dirty and see a finished project in the end,” he said.

Touchy-Feely Sermons

Another turn-off for men is touchy-feely sermons. Pearcey said the modern church stresses emotions and inner spiritual experiences while neglecting the intellectual side of the faith.

“The more traditionally masculine side of Christianity enjoys crossing swords with hostile secular worldviews. So, as long as Christianity appeals to the emotional, therapeutic, interpersonal, relational areas, it’s not going to appeal to men as much as to women,” Pearcey said.

Churches should engage men’s intellects to help them see the relevance of Christianity to the “real” world of politics, industry and business, Pearcey said.

“We have to recover the notion that Christianity is true on all levels, not just for your emotional life or repairing relationships, as important as those things are,” she said.

Many churches emphasize Jesus’ softer teachings, like his love and his desire to save, and they ignore the doctrines of sin and hell, according to Podles. But men dislike liberal Christianity — “a mild religion of progress and enlightenment” as opposed to a battle between good and evil, Podles said.

Men want to expend their lives for a great cause, even if it involves risk, according to Murrow. He said that’s why the U.S. military’s “Army of One” campaign was effective. But American churches rarely teach about Christian suffering and martyrdom, Murrow said. Instead, today’s Christianity is presented as an antidote to these things, he said.

“Men are more attracted to religion if it presented as a quest, an adventure, a heroic exploit,” Pearcey said. “They want something challenging, bracing, demanding.”

To reach men, churches should stress the cost and dangers of following Christ — including Christians’ conflict with the world, the flesh and the devil, according to Podles.

Yet, men should be reminded that the sacrifice won’t always be a “huge, glorious display like William Wallace stepping out on a battlefield,” Erre said. Many times it will be staying in a troubled marriage, raising a handicapped child, or working a hated job to provide for a family, he said.

Girly-Men Pastors

Touchy-feely sermons come from touchy-feely pastors. A feminized church tends to attract more “gentle, sensitive, nurturing” leadership,” according to Pearcey.

“If religion is defined primarily in terms of emotional experience and is therapeutic, then who is it going to attract as ministers?” she said.

Pearcey said to consider a typical youth pastor.

“He’s really into relationships, very motivating, but is he teaching good apologetics? Is he teaching youth to use their minds and to understand deeper theological truths? At least the ones I’ve known haven’t,” she said. “Today, the common trajectory is for youth pastors to become senior pastors,” she added.

Murrow argues that the church needs strong, masculine leadership because men follow men. He said Jesus' disciples are a prime example of this principle.

“Bold leadership attracts men. But even more attractive than a dynamic pastor is the sight of men in the pews who are true followers of Jesus Christ,” Murrow said in his book.

Morrow anticipates concern from some women that he is promoting unilateral male leadership. He said he is not seeking male dominance, but male resurgence.

Thoennes is also concerned about a lack of strong, male leadership in the church. But he said, if the church has become feminized, then he doesn't see that as the fault of women or the church — but of men — who, he believes, have abdicated the involvement they should have.

“If the church doesn't have enough strong male influence, that's not a reason for men to stop going, but a great reason for them to go,” he said.

To help male Biola students become leaders, Student Ministries plans to launch a chapter of Men's Fraternity next fall, led by Jonathan Morrow, a seminary student at Biola.

Yet, much of the church is seeking further feminization, through attempts to increase female clergy and to create gender-neutral Bibles and hymns. Many liberal seminaries now graduate equal numbers of women and men, or more women than men, like Yale Divinity School and Harvard Divinity School.

(Currently, Biola's seminary, Talbot School of Theology, is about 76 percent men.)

Johnstone believes the feminist movement in mainline churches has contributed to the decline in male membership.

Restoring Balance

Murrow said churches that seek to reverse this feminization might face opposition, as the leaders in his church first did.

But he and other leaders in the men's movement, like Gardner, believe a masculine spirit will bring men, and gender balance, to the church.

“Once you start attracting a man's full heart, soul, mind and strength — and he sees that there are ways he can use all those in the church — then we're going to start seeing a turnaround of the absent man,” Gardner said.