

Whatever happened to all the men?

Reflections on gender imbalance in East Asian churches

Gender imbalance in the church – a problem encountered in East Asia

For a long time, the gender imbalance of the East Asian churches has been a matter of some concern. Mission leaders used to write to mobilisers telling them to stop recruiting single ladies as if it were their fault that the men were not being reached, as if we should stop reaching Asian women for Christ to solve this serious problem. Gender imbalance in its extreme form in East Asian churches causes suffering for Christian women. How is support being provided? It also challenges the way both missionaries and local believers have sought to reach men, the theological and missiological principles that define the way we work. This article is a plea for new biblical strategies that might, under God, improve the situation.

Korea

Some years ago, I was conducting a preaching seminar for pastors in Seoul, Korea. After one of the workshops, a group of pastors approached me with a problem. Some of the teaching of the New Testament (they said) was inappropriate for the Korean Church and could not be expounded to their congregations. One such passage was 2 Corinthians 6:14ff, normally interpreted, *inter alia*, to mean that Christians should not marry unbelievers. In Korea, I was told, there are many more Christian women than Christian men.¹ I sug-

gested that this was common in many parts of the world. But they claimed that in Korean society there is no place and no provision for the elderly single woman. I realised that the gender imbalance in the church was creating serious problems for women believers. I believed, and still do believe, that the pastors there should expound 2 Corinthians 6, precisely because it is part of God's Word. But the implications for the social welfare of the church are serious. If Christian women are not to marry unbelievers, then the church family should provide for their needs in old age. I do not know whether such provision is now available, or whether many Korean women still solve the problem by marrying unbelievers.

Mongolia

On my first visit to Mongolia, I was taken to a little church in a mining town. The building was fragile, but largely full of young worshippers. The pastor was a keen young man still completing his Bible College training. But there were remarkably few men in the congregation. On the bus journey back to Ulaan Baator, I prayed with the pastor. He had a remarkable missionary vision – for Kasaks, Russians, Muslims and Buddhists.

In October 2005, I returned and, to my amazement, bumped into the same pastor in the Bible College in Ulaan Baator. He is now a governor of the college. Again we prayed together, rejoicing that now six Kasaks in the town were believing. But this time his urgent prayer request was that he and his contemporaries would learn how to reach men for Christ. I was told that the cost of discipleship for young Mongolian women was stark: were

they prepared to stay single for the rest of their lives? 80% of the Mongolian church is female.

Some of course marry unbelievers out of ignorance of the Scriptures, out of desperation, out of preference, or out of a vain hope that this is the way to convert men. In fact, some of my British prayer partners have suggested a strategy of evangelistic marriages! While the Lord has been merciful to some, I have met many miserable Asian Christian women who have lived to regret their marriage to an unbelieving man.²

Dick Dowsett

China

Recently, in Durham, England, I met a bright Christian intellectual woman from China. She was anxious about her future in China because of the serious gender imbalance in the churches there – generally reckoned to be 80% female.³ “Who will we women marry if the men are not reached for Christ?” she asked. She was young enough to joke about it, but it clearly troubled her deeply.

2 Rebecca Lewis, *op cit.* argues that “One of the ways early believing women spread the church was by marrying non-Christian men.” But her use of 1 Peter 3:1-2 and 1 Corinthians 7:13-14 to support this is unconvincing since the texts more obviously refer to women converted after marriage. Lewis does not however recommend the practice as a church planting strategy!

3 David Aikman, *Jesus in Beijing: How Christianity is Transforming China and Changing the Global Balance of Power*, (Washington DC: Regnery Publishing, Inc., 2003), p 98. “No one from any quarter, official or unofficial, disputed the eighty per cent figure I was given.”

1 Korea's churches are 70% female. Rebecca Lewis, “Underground Church Movements: The Surprising Role of Women's Network,” *International Journal of Frontier Missions*, 21:4 Winter 2004.

A couple of years ago, I visited a friendly house church in a Chinese city, and was told to preach by the woman leading it. They were surprisingly responsive to this foreign preacher. Their questions were not the usual ones about the different life in the West, but urgent ones about living for Christ in their city. One woman began the questioning, angry with God because, following the death of one of her parents, her boyfriend had ended their relationship. It took much longer for the men in the congregation to open up at all. The next day I was asked to return to what turned out to be a women's meeting. Their leaders urged me to pray for the men: that they would take discipleship more seriously and that they would share in the leadership of the work of the church.⁴ They were relieved to bring this burden out into the open and pray about it. To my embarrassment, they wept when I left.

I did meet some fine Christian men in that city and plenty of male students and academics that were prepared to discuss the gospel and learn about the Christian faith. But the majority of those deeply committed to outreach were the women. Their standard of daring commitment was a challenge to me. Many of the Christian men seemed content to let them get on with it. But the women long for partnership in ministry: men and women working together with a shared commitment to the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

An elderly woman in Beijing once asked me "How should a woman submit to her husband if he asks her to do really stupid things?" We had fun exploring the apposite teaching of 1 Peter 3. The Scripture recognises that it may often be the case that only one of a married couple is converted. It faces the problems of divided loyalties when only one of the two responds to the gospel. But when the gender imbalance in the church is extreme, the problem is more widespread.

Japan

Occasionally, on my visits to Japan, I have met the husband of a believing woman who has been prepared to consider the gospel. I cannot remember ever having met a man whose wife was not yet converted. Prayer

4 Aikman, *op cit.*, believes that "the eighty percent female composition of China's Christian community as a whole is not reflected at the leadership level of the house churches." My impression is that while the leadership is often male, most of the work is done by the women!

letters are full of stories of women whose husbands have forbidden them to be baptised or to attend Christian meetings. But the majority of interested contacts in most reports are housewives.

Summary

In my limited experience, the gender imbalance in the churches of Mongolia, China and Japan, and possibly even Korea, increases the pressure on Christian women – marital stress, economic insecurity, spiritual loneliness and leadership burden. It also creates an extra barrier for younger women considering Christian commitment.

Questions needing research about support networks for Christian women

There are a number of questions that need to be answered.

1. Is there provision of care and finance in the East Asian churches for elderly single women? What is needed? Where is this most important?
2. Is there emotional support for young women with little prospect of marriage? How should this be given? For example, should we have the evangelical equivalent of nunneries (intentional religious communities for women), occasionally found in Europe, affirming the values of the single life for ministry to the church and to society?
3. Do the women who provide so much of the teaching and leadership in the churches feel affirmed in that ministry? Or do they have to bear the additional burden of beliefs that men would be better or even that women should not minister in gender-mixed congregations? Are they made to feel that their work is just a necessary evil rather than something the Lord values and upholds? Do the ministering women need better theological affirmation of their role?⁵
4. What sort of networks are in place to help converted women in their discipleship and in being good wives to unbelieving husbands? Where do they go for help when the pressures are too great for them to carry alone?

5 See for example Loren Cunningham and David Joel Hamilton with Janice Rogers, *Why Not Women? A Fresh Look at Scripture on Women in Missions, Ministry, and Leadership*, (YWAM Publishing: Seattle, 2000).

Questions about the Christian failure to reach East Asian men

Even in areas of huge responsiveness that some would call revival, like China and Korea, fewer men respond to the gospel. This raises questions about the nature of our gospel, the church culture and lifestyle, missionary penetration of the male world, the role of women in church and mission, and the priorities of the church and missions community.

1. The nature of our gospel

Some years ago Lish Eves, formerly working with OMF in Indonesia and subsequent missiologist at the London Bible College (now London School of Theology), introduced me to the concept of a female gospel. Although such a concept is open to serious criticism as sexist, I think it is worth raising. She argued that a need-orientated evangelism rarely reached any except weak and vulnerable males and that tough talk about the lordship of Christ and judgment was more likely to break through the macho shell of self-sufficiency. She argued that in many societies women are more used to admitting need and interdependence. So the need orientated "feminine gospel" drew out a response. Gender generalisations are relatively unreliable: the Bible makes far fewer than most societies do. But most cultures have gender stereotypes that are more or less normative for their people. In this respect, we need to ask whether our gospel presentations are properly contextualised for East Asian males. What is their religious starting point – their "altar to an unknown god"? Is it different from the East Asian women's starting point?⁶

Those who find the concept of male and female gospel presentations objectionable might perhaps consider the difference between a gospel for the exploited⁷ and a

6 Rebecca Lewis *op cit.* suggests that "In Korea and China, as well as in the Muslim world, women have traditionally practiced a much more animistic or folk version of the official religion." As such they are more likely to be searching for spiritual power.

7 Louise Edwards, "Women in the People's Republic of China: New challenges to the grand gender narrative," in Louise Edwards and Mina Roces, *Women in Asia: Tradition, Modernity and Globalisation*, (The University of Michigan Press: Ann Arbor, 2000). While many suppose that the traditional chauvinism of Chinese society was eradicated by Chinese communism, Edwards writes that it did "not necessarily equate to an improvement in women's status in the country. Indeed, the increasing diversity in economic and political power characteristic of the period has clearly widened the

gospel for exploiters. In John 4, Jesus brought the good news to a Samaritan woman. Although many preachers wax eloquent about her sexual sins, we are actually simply told that five men had had her and that her present partner had not made the marriage commitment to her. She, like the women in James Bond movies, had been used and discarded like a Kleenex tissue. Jesus did not criticise her lifestyle. Rather, he gently offered her living water, the sort of fulfilment that could never be found in a relationship with a sinful man. In contrast, in John 3, Jesus was far more confrontational with Nicodemus. If he were not born again, he could not begin to understand the kingdom of God let alone enter it. This was blunt talk to a teacher of Israel – someone who normally reckoned that he knew all the right answers. In Mark 10, the much loved rich young ruler was also confronted with a demanding challenge. He was ordered to leave Mammon, learn generosity, and follow Jesus. Self-made men were not offered a “what is your problem, come to Jesus” gospel by the Saviour.

Modern evangelism too often has a “one size fits all” approach. Some contemporary models are more confrontational about sin and repentance.⁸ But it may be fairly questioned whether even these begin where East Asian men are, or whether they are flexible enough to respond to the variety of individuals.

2. Church culture

Churches evolve their own culture and acceptable lifestyle. This may, or may not be biblical, but it becomes part of the cost for new believers joining the church and becoming part of the community of faith.

Mongolia

When I visited the church in a Mongolian mining village, the father of a Bible College student did not attend. He was a believer, and when we visited him in his ger, we learnt that he had a daily quiet time, reading his Bible and talking to the Lord. But he had not been to church for a long time,

gap between men and women's opportunities and expectations across a number of spheres”, p 81.

8 Since the mid-20th Century, various ABCs of salvation have been devised in the West: the Navigators' “Bridge”, Campus Crusade for Christ's “Four Spiritual Laws” and, with more emphasis on sin and judgment, “Two Ways to Live”. Though useful outlines for those learning to share the gospel, none of them starts from the worldview of the East Asian male.

leaving visitors with the impression that the Christian faith was for young women, not older men. After a while, during our visit, he excused himself for ten minutes, and my colleague realised why he no longer attended church. He was a smoker. And missionaries taught that converted people do not smoke cigarettes. Indeed, some missionaries forbade smokers from attending church, doubting that such people could be converted. Obviously, they had never encountered Dutch, Scandinavian and Indonesian chain-smoking saints. Personally, I dislike the smoking habit and believe it to be unhealthy. But it is not as dangerous as pride or gossip, lust or materialism. The Bible is clear on those issues. They are evil, and yet no one is kept out of church because they struggle with such sins. So my question is this: do the “thou shalt nots” of the church make unnecessary, or even unbiblical barriers to male discipleship?

Japan

The same issue has long worried me in Japan. Many Japanese businessmen tell you that they admire Christianity but they could never live it. I have long suspected that it is because they assume that as Christians they would have to abstain from alcohol completely, and they cannot see how to do that at times when the boss offers them a drink. There are painfully few businessmen in Japanese churches. One church I know is an exception. It does not teach mandatory total abstinence because the pastor does not believe that is biblical! After a visit to Germany and Holland where he met wine and beer drinking godly pastors, he re-examined the Scriptures and decided that he should now teach that it is wrong to get drunk or to force others to drink, and that all other rules in this matter are optional. The church has seen an unusual response among businessmen who, as believers, resolve to enjoy a drink where appropriate, but, in the power of Christ, not to get drunk. They have similarly seen a good response amongst teenage males since they decided that dyed hair and earrings were not serious issues for Christian discipleship.⁹

In writing this, I recognise that alcoholism is a terrible problem in both Japan and Mongolia, that smoking is a foul and unhealthy habit, and that teenage fashions

9 Katsumi Takagi of World Vision, Japan in an unpublished letter.

may create barriers with adult society. But I still wish to raise this issue: does church culture and lifestyle make it unnecessarily difficult for normal males to belong? Is the “holiness” that is taught biblical in its priorities, or is it “straining at gnats and swallowing camels” with man-made rules that exclude mainstream males?

3. Penetration of male society

Sometimes the problem of unreached people is a problem of missionary penetration of that society.

Japan

Recently some short-term workers in Japan have questioned how far male church-planters in Japan have penetrated male society there.¹⁰ Members of my mission receive a remittance. That means that they are released from the need to engage in other work in order to be full-time in the ministry of the Word. But this very lifestyle substantially cuts them off from Japanese male society. Men leave the housing area early in the morning to go to their companies. They return late at night since the day's work is often followed by almost compulsory time in the company club with their boss. If men are in management, they spend weekends visiting workers who are sick or bereaved or celebrating the birth of a child. The company absorbs an enormous amount of time. The missionary has no place in the company. He remains at home, like a housewife. And missionary letters are filled with news of male missionaries preaching at ladies' cookery classes. Occasionally men are reached, but they are usually the self-employed or those who are mentally or physically sick. These people all need to be reached and I rejoice that they are. But the mainstream males are not reached.

This challenges our concept of the ministry. Either men do it full-time or they do it in their spare time. But the main sphere of ministry and mission for most people should be at their workplace, integrated into their patterns of work. Do we not need a strategy of placing Christians in the male workplace as workers? There they should model Christian discipleship and teach it appropriately. I do not see such a role as replacing that of the full-time Bible teacher, but as working alongside it. If the male missionary model

10 From a discussion with staff workers and relay workers of Universities and Colleges Christian Fellowship at their annual leadership forum, 2004.

of Christianity looks rather like a Japanese housewife, we cannot expect males to be drawn in. Their wives, however, will find a faith that fits with staying at home and is good for them. Should mission agencies appoint a liaison officer with Japanese companies, and with schools and colleges that want to employ foreign workers? Maybe we should also explore openings in multi-national companies where most of the workforce is Japanese.

I am unsure what ways have been tried to build bridges into Japanese male society. A Jesuit ran an evangelistic whiskey bar!¹¹ I would not particularly recommend such a strategy. Sports ministry has built some bridges. The problem is not during the game but afterwards when drunkenness and visits to brothels are common, according to a Japanese rugby playing friend. Work with street dancers of Japan's counter-culture has been effective. It does not, however, give an answer for reaching main-stream males. We must continue to look for ways to belong where they belong, sharing in everything possible except sin.

China and Germany

In China, however, most Christian expatriates are employed, many as English teachers, and some in companies. But the problem of our failure to reach many men remains. A Chinese entrepreneur has formed a gathering for senior businessmen: a safe place for them to admit their needs and concerns. Others are working on sports ministry, building on the popularity of soccer. I recently raised this problem in Germany with male theological students who were preparing for Christian ministry. On a summer seaside mission they had spent most of their time chatting evangelistically with girls. With some embarrassment, they confessed they found that easier than trying to persuade men to commit themselves to Christ. Are we ourselves less than convinced that church is a suitable place for men? Is our gospel presentation so far removed from normal male chat that we are uncomfortable raising it?

4. The role of women in the problem

At one point in OMF history, it was seriously suggested that we should tackle the problem of gender imbalance by accepting

fewer women missionaries.¹² This was scandalous on two counts. It is immoral to argue that we should solve the problem by reaching fewer women. The speediest evangelisation of East Asia's millions means just that – the more women who are converted the better! It is also erroneous to suggest that men are more effective than women at reaching men. In a faith that began with women persuading men that Jesus had risen, this is outrageous.



Dick Dowsett became an OMF International missionary in 1968, initially working with students in the Philippines. For many years he has had an international Bible teaching ministry, and remains passionate about mobilizing for mission, discipling students, and making Asian friends.

However, in the last twenty years, there has been evidence within some agencies of pressure on many women to restrict their ministry to their own gender. This has arisen as Christians who believe that 1 Timothy 2:12 forbids women from ministering to men have become more aggressive in seeking to impose their point of view. In China, many of the most effective missionaries in discipling, training, mobilising and mentoring men were women. They were less threatening in nurturing male leadership development.¹³ They were acceptably direct in their evangelism. At present, in some areas, OMF has released women into a wide ministry among both sexes. The Indonesian synods to which some of our women have been seconded have been particularly good in this respect too. But there is increasing pressure in some places, from

¹² I received memos to this effect from some OMF field leaders in the early 1980s.

¹³ Valerie Griffiths, *Not Less than Everything. The courageous women who carried the Christian gospel to China*, (Oxford & Grand Rapids: Monarch Books, 2004), p 322.

some supporting churches and from other workers, to restrict women's ministry. There is no evidence that such restrictions have increased the outreach to men! OMF/CIM's tradition has been to release women for wide ministry. Perhaps this needs to be reaffirmed, for it has good theological foundations, even if there are some evangelicals who are unaware of that. If we are to reach the whole of East Asian society, we should not restrict the ministry of anyone who is both called and gifted for the task.

5. The focus of our ministry

Finally, we need to re-examine the focus of our ministry. When I went to the Philippines, it was to be seconded to student ministry. Older missionaries told me that such ministry did not build churches and that OMF was a church-planting mission. That was wrong. Today many of the best Bible teachers there came out of that student work. Leaders in Muslim outreach and in overseas mission were also nurtured through student ministry. Yet still the cry goes up: "We are a church-planting mission. We should not put people into student work." In some countries, our student workers have been under pressure to major in church-planting. But when is the best time to reach men for Christ? According to a Japanese pastor in Hirosaki, not himself a university graduate, the only time that male Japanese have space to learn about the Christian faith is when they are students. As high school pupils they are endlessly cramming; as company employees they work long hours. But students have time. Far from seeing student work as a threat to church planting, we should see it as a special opportunity for reaching men (and women for that matter) for Christ. Students have been so responsive in China that the government has attempted to ban campus ministry.¹⁴ This is the age group where men respond.

We need to watch out lest doctrinaire mission theory restricts our opportunity to reach men for Christ. The prejudice against student ministry is but one example.

Conclusion

I do not believe there is a simple solution to the problem of serious gender imbalance.

¹¹ Featured in the BBC series, "Missionaries" by Julian Pettifer.

¹⁴ For example, legislation forbidding Christian activities on university campuses was published in October 2004.

ance in the East Asian churches. But I am persuaded that we could do better if we address the issues contained in this paper. These include our theology of the gospel, our concept of holiness, our models of mission, our attitude to women in ministry and the foci of our work. Someone suggested to me that God in his sovereignty has chosen to have a church in East Asia that is predominately female. I do not believe it is his will that women should be harassed with the problems arising from our failure to reach men. And I cannot accept that we can use the doctrine of election to escape our responsibility to do a better job. <<

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Perhaps more worrying than the numbers is the quality of the men we are reaching. Not only are most male converts seen to be 'wimpish', with some sterling exceptions, they are usually not the type who would exercise leadership and exert influence even in the larger society. In contrast, most women converts tend to be high quality, reached and nurtured by strong women. There tends to be a strong outreach and discipling tradition among the women, but not an equally strong tradition among men. The result is a good deal of gender imbalance. This is particularly hard for high-calibre women who have enormous gifts for ministry yet are constrained within theological dogmas of male dominance to make way for men who can hardly hold a candle to them.

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