

A Line of Matriarchs: Results from the Three Generations Project
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Title of proposal:

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Proposal abstract:

Although shared practices are central to religious socialization, relationships empower such sharing. Familial relationships are the most durable and effective of such relationships, even when family form varies. Though many ethnic and faith groups tend to emphasize patriarchal leadership within congregations and families, in fact matriarchs serve as the spiritual anchors for succeeding generations in a surprising number of three (and more) generation families. Data supporting this assertion are a part of the emerging results of the Three Generations Project, a study of faith families within Churches of Christ.

Proposal description:

Goals: Within most Christian faith groups, communities interpret their sacred texts, traditions, and context to produce a set of norms for their community. Such norms include the appropriate persons and means to socialize the next generation in matters of faith. Until recent

history, the norm for most families and congregations within conservative Protestant groups has entailed the assumption of patriarchal leadership. Despite the establishment of such norms, there has been little evaluation or understanding of what has actually worked when families sustainably share their faith across generations. In the case of patriarchal leadership, a particular doctrinal and traditional understanding has guided the choice of faith sharing practices. This project did not seek to undertake the theological or philosophical task of questioning tradition, but rather to ascertain from actual family practice the extent to which public theology connects with private reality.

This study shows that, in Churches of Christ, the emergence of lines of spiritual matriarchs to maintain familial solidarity to this particular faith group is a necessary (if ironic) response to the need for leadership in religious tasks within the family and outside of corporate congregational worship. To establish this thesis, this work will first describe how families within this tradition have constructed roles and negotiated tasks in ways that are more practical than theological. In many cases, mothers have tended to handle certain spiritual roles and tasks in the family because of time commitments and child care responsibilities. This tendency has shifted in the most recent generation as marital partners have newly negotiated solutions. Thus, in this area, matriarchy is a functional response to perceived needs.

Secondly, matriarchy is a structural response to the need for familial spiritual leadership. This paper will present genealogical evidence that faith practices often follow maternal bloodlines instead of paternal. Narrativ evidence will also show that women often make key choices whether to stand firm within their faith group or to yield previously held ground in order to maintain family solidarity and continuity. Such matriarchy actually takes theological

stands: sometimes conservative to maintain connection with the mainstream of the faith group and sometimes flexibly progressive in order to adjust the boundaries of the group to keep younger generations with beliefs that are unorthodox, but not central, to the identity of the faith community.

The context

This study focuses on families who are members of *a cappella* Churches of Christ, one of three significant strands of the Stone-Campbell Restoration Movement (hereinafter, SCM): the Disciples of Christ (Christian Church), the Christian Churches/Churches of Christ, and the Churches of Christ, Non-instrumental. With roots in Scotland and Ireland (McMillon, 1988), this movement grew rapidly in the United States in the early 19th century. Although shaped by many, two of the most important leaders in the early SCM were Barton Stone (1772-1844) and Alexander Campbell (1788-1866). James O’Kelly and Elias Smith led similar “Christian” movements. The SCM is rooted in the quest for church unity through the restoration of the principles and practices of the primitive first-century church (Hughes, 1996; Hatch, 1989). Initially rejecting the use of any but canonical materials to understand the primitive church, the careful reading of Scripture, particularly the New Testament, took a place of primary importance among members of the SCM.

Since the members of the non-instrumental Churches of Christ have prided themselves in being called “a people of the book,” their efforts to connect all aspects of belief and life to the Scriptures have significantly shaped the theology of the movement. Essentially orthodox in many regards, the differences that came to define this group can largely be found in its ecclesiology, soteriology, and liturgy.

In ecclesiology, the Churches of Christ are free churches, devoid of attachments to any particular government (Ferguson, 1996). With no overarching governing body or convention, the polity of these churches is based on radical congregational autonomy, with a multiplicity of local elders (bishops, shepherds) governing each individual congregation separately. Deacons function under the authority of these elders in various roles defined by the individual church. This movement has historically eschewed clergy-laity distinctions, considering every member to be part of a royal priesthood (1 Pet 2:9).

The soteriology of this group is rooted in the practice of believer's baptism by immersion. SCM churches hold that baptism is the means by which God saves and adds humans to the church. Since SCM churches have rejected the Augustinian concept of inherited depravity, they see children living in innocence (although capable of wrong) until either they choose to accept their own faith through baptism or they pass some "age of accountability" at which time they are no longer innocent but fully responsible for sin in their life (Bruner, 2005). Because of the practice of believer's baptism, neither infant baptism nor confirmation has a part in Church of Christ practice.

The worship practices of this faith group are free-form and not based on any formal liturgy. These churches assert biblical authority for five fundamental "acts of worship" that must take place each first day of the week: prayer, song, sermon, giving, and the Lord's Supper (Eucharist). Prayers are usually *ad libitum* and largely petitionary in form. Consistent with the SCM emphasis on Scripture, sermons tend to dominate the use of time during worship and are often exegetical or topical with abundant proof texts. One of the most distinctive features of

this fellowship is *a cappella* congregational singing. Over the years this became the practice of four-part singing (soprano, alto, tenor, bass).

Beliefs and practices connected with gender have shifted over the years. In the early 1800's, churches associated with the New England "Christian" movement led by James O'Kelly (1735-1826) and Elias Smith (1769-1846) supported the efforts of women evangelists. Although they encountered resistance in some communities, women like Nancy Cram, Abigail Roberts, Clarissa Danforth, and Nancy Towle served for decades as itinerant preachers (Allen, 22-31; Hatch 78-79). Western churches did not so readily receive women in their pulpits. In the last half of the 19th century, thought leaders in the Churches of Christ (exemplified by David Lipscomb) strongly advanced the ideas of the "cult of true womanhood" (Allen, 130). As Fundamentalist groups arose at the turn of the 20th century, Churches of Christ tended to adopt beliefs more in line with their thought and their focus on literal readings of certain Pauline texts (Pulley, 2004) than with the Disciples of Christ, whose ministers and scholars participated more in biblical critical scholarship.

Though neither the label fundamentalist nor evangelical fits the Churches of Christ, there have been similarities among those groups in their stances toward gender-defined roles.

Methods: This project identifies common intergenerational factors in faith sharing within a particular conservative Protestant faith fellowship, the Churches of Christ, by conversing with families that have remained in that fellowship for three or more generations. Researchers use qualitative research methods to develop a grounded understanding (Lee, 1999, p. 39) of how faith-resilient families have adapted to changing circumstances and significant life

stressors from generation to generation. These conversations with purposefully selected families (Patton, 2005, p. 185) have produced insights into how such families have grown together in faith. The approach taken in this study required that participants in all three generations: (1) were willing to participate in this study, (2) were adults with the liberty to make choices about where and whether to pursue their faith and (3) had adequate possession of their faculties of recall and communication.

This particular qualitative study produces a complex perspective of the faith practices used by respondent families by utilizing a triangulation of methods (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Patton, 1987). The three methods used in this study are documents, questionnaires, and interviews. The researchers evaluate two historical documents produced by the respondent families: (1) an annal of the family's spiritual life and (2) a genogram. Among other facts, the annals record which congregations in what physical locations that respondents have attended, as well as significant community roles, spiritual events, and mentoring relationships that have coincided with those locations.

The questionnaires are a battery of validated measures producing information about respondent attachments to God, parenting bonding, and orthodoxy of doctrine. The measures used in this study are: Attachment to God Index (Beck & McDonald, 2004), Christian Orthodoxy Scale (Fullerton & Hunsberger, 1982), Multidimensional Quest Orientation Scale (Beck & Jessup, 2004), Parental Bonding Instrument (Parker, Tupling, & Brown, 1979), and the Religious Emphasis Scale (Altemeyer, 1988; Hunsberger, 1999). These instruments also provide quantitative data to compare to qualitative understandings formed by this study.

Central to the project are private, semi-structured interviews conducted with at least one member of each of three generations of faith within the family. These interviews were recorded and transcribed for later coding. The investigators designed questions for these semi-structured interviews that have evoked narratives of the respondent's experience of their spiritual formation within their family.

Analysis and Preliminary Results: As the various types of data have emerged from each of the generations, the investigators have engaged the data to construct, test, and correct tentative findings and theories. This paper presents partial and preliminary findings of this study. Not only are a surprising number of matriarchs present in the initial group of families comprising the sample, but in many cases these matriarchs form a chain that spans multiple generations (up to five generations, thus far). Such generational matriarchs may function in various family types and often keep their role even when strong male leaders (including deacons, elders, or ministers) emerge within, or marry into, the family.

In Churches of Christ, certain spiritual practices are formative in socializing children as members of this particular faith group. Data emerging from this study show that prayer, Bible study, attending worship, and living moral lives are, in the opinion of the respondents, the central spiritual practices for families within this particular faith group. One generation one respondent spoke of her mother's moral example in this way: "I think observing her life, her integrity, her honesty, always trying to do the right thing, serving other people, I think made a strong impression on me. I wanted to be like that. So in her quiet way—not much verbal discussion with us about her faith—but it was more my observation of her demonstration of

her faith.”¹ Parents are the exemplars for children in the practice of these disciplines, yet such modeling tends to be gendered.

In considering the spiritual discipline of prayer, respondents recall two recurring prayer times prominent in their lives as children: mealtime and bedtime. Among the respondents in this study, fathers are almost universally the parents who lead prayer at the dinner table. When asked about their first memories of prayer, respondents would typically recall memories as did this generation two mother about her generation one matriarch:

- R: It would have to be at meal time and when we went to bed at night. Mother would tuck me in and say prayers. That’s the earliest I remember.
- Q: Who typically did the praying at meal time?
- R: My dad.²

In a very similar way, generation three of the same family recalls being parented by her generation two mother:

- Q: What are the earliest memories you have of prayer in your family?
- R: Um, I think mine would be sitting around the table at dinner, with my dad. My dad was always the one that led the prayer and we did it at every meal. That’s what I remember the earliest.
- Q: What are other times of family prayer that you remember?
- R: My mom used to tuck me in at bedtime and said prayer. It didn’t happen every night but I remember very vaguely of her reading a story to me and saying a prayer before I went to bed.³

Ultimately, the third generation describes their prayer practice with the fourth generation: “I read her Bible every night to her. After we read the bible we talk about the story that we just

¹ F7G1P1F, interview.

² F19G2P1F, interview. See also F25G2P1F, interview.

³ F19G3P1F, interview. See also: F22G2P1M, interview.

read again. We always end with praying for our family and our friends. At the dinner table, we say the same prayer every night, and she's almost saying it on her own now."⁴

Other respondents echoed that it was usually the mother who handled bedtime prayers, "Praying with my mom at bed time with my mom when I was a little girl and praying at the dinner table."⁵ When fathers are present but do not lead the prayer, they are usually the one who decides who does lead the prayer, whether by naming the leader, or asking for volunteers, or taking turns.⁶ "At dinner time—we would take turns as to who would pray. But my mom never prayed. It was always me, or my brothers, or my dad who prayed."⁷

Mothers may also teach their children how to pray, yet they typically do so as a part of bedtime prayers. One generation two mother recalls, "My earliest memories of prayer are of my mother, praying with me at bedtime. At first she read a prayer out of a children's book, but as time went on, I began to say my own prayers."⁸ Her son received his understanding of prayer from her in a similar way: "As far back as I can remember my mom would sit down with my brother and I and read us a story out of the *Children's Story Bible*, then after that we would pray together."⁹ A generation one woman whose father was not converted until later in her life noted that prayers happened at "bedtime mainly because my dad was never home at mealtime. He worked different hours so we ate before he got home and were in bed before he got home."¹⁰ Sometimes this learning process happened without mothers ever actually having

⁴ F19G3P1F, interview.

⁵ F15G2P1F, interview.

⁶ F22G3P1M, interview.

⁷ F8G3P1F, interview.

⁸ F10G2P1F, interview.

⁹ F10G3P1F, interview.

¹⁰ F19G1P1F, interview.

prayed in front of their children. As a matter of fact, some generation two and generation three respondents observed that they had never heard their mothers pray, even though they were fully aware that this was her regular practice.

Although fathers may sometimes be a part of bedtime spiritual practices, including Bible reading, story time, and prayer, such bedtime activities are more usually led by mothers.

Quotes about mothers leading devotionals. When fathers did lead such bedtime devotionals, the results were often memorable. Quote about fathers.

Prayer practices, though, are changing over time for various reasons: attitudes in the church, individual attitudes, and personal temperament, for example. Consider this exchange with a generation three parent teaching her daughter to pray:

R: At the dinner table, we say the same prayer every night, and she's almost saying it on her own now. We want to teach her to be open about praying because me growing up it wasn't like that.

Q: What do you mean by that?

R: My dad was always the one that said the prayer so I was never in a position that I had to. And, you know, when I got married, Matt was in a family where he grew up that his mom said the prayer a lot and when we would pray he would ask me to pray and I wouldn't do it. I feel like prayer is a very personal thing to me. I struggle to pray in front of people because I don't want to sound dumb. I don't want to sound like I don't know what I'm talking about. I want to teach Lauren that it is ok to pray out loud. That it is ok to pray in front of other people because I was scared about doing it. One year we had Small Groups and after Bible Study we did a big chain prayer and every night I would get nervous and get sick to my stomach because I don't know how. I still struggle with how to pray. Do I just talk like he's there? Do I have to get formal? I want Lauren and Hanna to feel like it's ok to pray openly and not be scared to do it.

Q: Do you feel like your dad being the only one that prayed has hindered you from being open about praying? Looking back, how do you feel about that? What are your thoughts on that?

R: I'm not. I'm a shy person when it comes to being in front of people. So even if I had the opportunity to do it more I don't know if I would do it. I'm just a private person. Very quiet. I really struggle with when I'm on

the spot on how to say things, how to word things. And so, I tend to ramble when I do get nervous so I don't know if it would have changed anything.

Q: Within the family?

R: Within the family, yeah, it definitely would have changed me. It would have changed my views on it. It would have helped me change my views on it more but I don't think that's just the type of person I am. A very private person. I don't want Lauren to feel that way. The Church of Christ is different now than it used to be. It's a lot more open. People are praying openly now. It's not so much that the men have to lead all of the prayers in the Bible classes. I want her to feel comfortable doing that when she's in the youth group.¹¹

The faith of fathers was often more seen than heard. "We were taught that praying was important, but we just prayed more independently. Dad was never comfortable with leading a public prayer of any kind."¹² "We had some family devotionals. My mom was over those and she taught us 3 girls. We looked forward to that time and would do some studying to get ready for those. Dad was not vocal about his faith. When it came to that, he was a man of action rather than words."¹³

One interesting definition of roles comes from a dialogue about metaphors:

Q: What is the metaphor that best describes the church? Explain.

A: Bride of Christ? To pull on one that's already been used.

Q: Well, it's very biblical, is it not?

A: Yes, it is. And I think being a bride myself, I may understand that a little bit better now. Sometimes the church gets it right and sometimes the church doesn't get it right. But God still loves us and He's the head and He's trying to direct us spiritually. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't. But it's the one that presents faith to the rest of the world. I mean, look at our marriage, Bart's at work, and I'm the one that most people see in our family. I'm the one that takes Sarah to places, that brings food to those that are sick or whatever. I represent our marriage

¹¹ F19G3P1F, interview.

¹² F1G2P1F, interview.

¹³ F1G2P1F, interview.

to other people. I think that's what the church does. It represents the faith to others. That God is still in it.¹⁴

As children begin to form their views of God, they may identify with the views of the same gender parent; "I think I see God very similarly to the way my mother does. I think my dad being male probably has a little different look,"¹⁵ observes a generation two daughter about generation one mother. Sometimes, though, offspring choose the view of the parent that makes sense to them, not necessarily the view of the same-gender parent. This generation three son said,

I think I have a closer relationship with God than my father does. But I think my mother and I have very similar views on God. The beauty of that similarity is that she never pushed that on me. Once I began to question some things, she revealed similar sentiments and we have good discussions about what God is like and what he desires from us.¹⁶

Some generations still have a persistent view of the male as the leader and as the parent with the more important career. One generation one mother remarked about her generation two daughter,

Well, I think the training Candace had in the home, when you marry, your husband is your number one focus, except God of course, whatever is required, that is what you do. It was her job to accept it—that her husband was a serviceman and would take her all over the world—and I had to accept it. She was gone for 10 years to Germany and that's the way it is. You just trust that what they have learned at home will carry them through and you just accept the normal things that happen in life and go on.¹⁷

Although many remembered their mothers as Bible class teachers, others took up less public, if no less important roles in the church: "My mother wasn't as much a teacher but she

¹⁴ F1G3P1F, interview. Names have been changed.

¹⁵ F11G2P1F, interview.

¹⁶ F10G3P1M, interview.

¹⁷ F7G1P1F, interview. Name and location changed.

did things for those who were ill, for funerals and for the nursery in particular, she worked in it.”¹⁸

There have been those with more of a partnership view, even among the first generation in this study. A generation one widower speaks about such a relationship:

My wife was her own person in the Lord and I was, too. I like that very much because she was not clingy vine, she was her own person. She was a born teacher and a music major in college in piano. She was very much a partner in our family with everything we did spiritually. We had a lot in common that way. So when I had lost her, her faith was strong, and so I knew exactly what she would do if I had died: she'd [have] gone on and she would have continued to do what she could do physically.¹⁹

Generation three shows signs of a changing perspective on the relative roles of men and women in the church. One generation three father expressed his hopes for the future church,

I think everyone would understand their required and their obligation to give not only monetarily but also used their gifts God has imparted to them. I'd hope my kids were using their gifts and that my daughter's gifts wouldn't just be restricted to children's worship. I think our women are underutilized in the church. I would hope my daughter would have something to offer the church.²⁰

Another generation three father engaged the researcher in a conversation about women and leadership:

R: I would love to see men and women treated a bit more equally. And I think they are treated equally in some instances, but it just seems like no one's willing to, we don't want to step on anyone's toes.

Q: So what would that look like?

A: A woman's prayer is just as good as a man's prayer. If a woman can write a church book song, why can't she lead a prayer right in front of the congregation? Logically it didn't make much sense to me. I understand that many of the scriptures we go off mainly are Paul's instructions to Timothy, but that was right for those people and the place. I mean, he

¹⁸ F22G1P1F, interview.

¹⁹ F20G1P1M, interview.

²⁰ F7G3P1M, interview.

was, he was, wasn't Timothy going to the Greeks, wasn't he preaching to the Greeks, isn't that right?

Q: He was mainly speaking, yes, to Gentiles.

A: Gentiles, and so. If I remember my Greek philosophy, didn't they assume that to think you had to have a brain and usually thought of men as better thinkers than women. All the great Greek philosophers are men. They didn't have a lot of respect for women to begin with. Paul told Timothy to be circumcised even though he didn't need to be, it was all about keeping appearances. . . . And if my generation and my grandchildren's generation are not ready for equal leadership and gender neutrality, so be it. Because the worst thing we could do is drive people away. But at the same time, you're driving people away to begin with by not allowing women.²¹

Some women, though comfortable with some changes in roles, have limits. A dialogue with a generation three mother gives one common opinion:

Q: Do you think God had more planned for women?

R: Yeah I do. I think if I went to a church and saw a female preaching I would be very uncomfortable with that. Or, a woman being part of the Communion. I grew up in a church where women couldn't teach past a certain grade level. At my church now we have a female children's minister. I think that's ok because females tend to be more of a better organizer. More caring and creative in that aspect. I feel like there can be more roles for us rather than just teaching below third grade. . . . I mentioned a little bit more of women's roles. Not so much women in the pulpit or serving communion but more of . . . I don't know what we could do more of but just see more of children's ministers as women. I really don't know. I don't see a whole lot of change as I've gotten older so I don't really know what we could do. Maybe have more women in, not a deacon-like role, but in organizations that the church does, put women in charge of those organizations. Shut-ins and things like that. I hope I see a little bit of change like that but I pretty much hope it stays the same. I don't want it to change a whole lot.²²

Fathers sometimes served as models and figures of accountability: "Work was another thing that they did, that's why it was instilled so much in me . . . working 60 hours a week. My

²¹ F14G3P1M, interview.

²² F19G3P1F, interview.

dad would do the same. He would get up; he would purposefully not schedule things on Sundays; he wouldn't let us play sports that involved Wednesday night sports if it could be avoided. Things like that. Those are all pretty big deals, especially when you get into high school."²³ Thus work and school are important, but not as important as spiritual matters. Sometimes, though, mothers bring accountability to the spiritual part of life. One generation one respondent recalls the influence of her mother: "I remember when I quit going to church there for a while when my children were young, my mother, when she found about it, she said 'Nancy, now you know what you're supposed to do.' She didn't fuss at me or anything, she just said, well, you know."²⁴

"My mother took the 4 of us to church alone. I'm sure, often didn't get anything out of the lessons but she felt it was important for us to be at church. She lived it, she didn't just drag us to church, she tried to be what God wanted her to be."²⁵ "My mother was very strong even though my father didn't go to church, she always got us kids to church. So, I always really appreciated that."²⁶

Conversion influence – "My grandfather was killed in a car accident and my father thought the world and all about him. And he knew that my grandfather had wanted him to become a Christian, but he had never submitted to that. And so, that is what spurred my father to become a Christian, being baptized. So we had a meeting with the family and my two older brothers and I and my father were all baptized at the same time."²⁷

²³ F22G3P1M, interview.

²⁴ F11G1P1F, interview. Name changed.

²⁵ F11G2P1F, interview.

²⁶ F15G1P1F, interview.

²⁷ F15G1P1F, interview.

The church was a very small group of people most of them have move from Tennessee and the Oklahoma area. Church was a place where you attended all day on Sunday it was at home and the church was small in this little Colorado town so my mother was probably the fountain head of faith in the family at first. Her mother had been reached out to my mother's uncle had been reached out to by one of the preachers. The uncle had own a grocery store in Knoxville Tennessee where he started a church in the store and my mother was a recipient of faith through her. Times were very hard but the church was very close and we spent the day together.²⁸

Do mature fathers seek to exert more of an influence on grown children as faith becomes more prominent in their own lives? One generation two parent notes,

My youngest daughter and me have been reading the Bible through the 2 years together but separate. We're doing it at our own pace but we discuss a lot of the chapters and the books as we've gone through them. Informal type, not as much formal, but that keeps ya . . . your kids can humble you so much when you see them growing.²⁹

With single parent families (or effectively single parent families), the influence of the present parent would seem to be critical. The interview with generation three daughter confirms this:

Q: What are the most important things you parents did to help shape your faith?

R: Interestingly enough, I would say that my mom . . . I don't know what I'm trying to say. Since my dad was not in the picture [dad had divorced mom], she always taught me from an early age that it didn't matter that you didn't have an earthly father because you always have a heavenly Father. So I think that being engraved into my mind at a young age has really shaped my spiritual beliefs today. And just her, mainly her persistence in making sure that I was always, you know, getting up and going to church, going to all the youth group activities and keeping involved and wanting me to go to a Christian college. The conversations that we had together were always, everything was always centered around God . . .³⁰

²⁸ F20G1P1M, interview.

²⁹ F18G2P1M, interview.

³⁰ F25G3P1F, interview.

Implications: The ability of a family with sequential matriarchs to maintain a steady connection to a single faith group for a number of generations suggests that spiritual matriarchies are at least as effective in espousing healthy faith in the long term as are patriarchies. This reality implies that, within this faith fellowship, traditional understandings of sacred texts and spiritual practices require re-examination.

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