

Filling the Void with “You are Welcome Here”

By Barb Wooler

Vacuums are dangerous things. We’re not talking about a cleaning tool, but about empty space.

Vacuums will be filled. Nature will always seek to fill them—that’s where sinkholes come from. Relationships are also averse to vacuums, such as things left unsaid. Because vacuums will be filled, each side often interprets the silence with their own inaccurate meaning, resulting in many ruptured relationships. Vacuums are dangerous things.

In the realm of local church ministry, there exists a vacuum, a void of things left unsaid, and pathways not forged, though no one knows why. In the lack of clarity, potential lay leaders have filled the void with messages such as “I am not valued” or “I am not welcome here.” It is this void that credentialing seeks to fill with a positive message that will strengthen the work of the Lord by providing more quality workers. While the Church needs more quality lay leaders among both women and men, we will focus here solely on how credentialing can produce more female leaders.

But first, we will define the term “credentialing.” In its simplest form, it refers to a process through which a person is examined by a qualified and trusted agency, board, or individual, and has been found to have the competence, skills, and character to serve in whatever capacity is being tested. Law students pass the Bar before they are credentialed to practice law. Medical doctors must pass Board exams before they are credentialed to practice medicine. A pastoral candidate goes through an ordination process on his way to becoming credentialed to serve as a pastor-elder. Credentialing is basically a more vigorous form of the more commonly used term of “certification.”



THE NEED

It has been my privilege to serve for many years with Encompass World Partners, an agency unrivaled in the Charis world in terms of preparing and engaging women in fruitful ministry. When I arrived on the field in the Central African Republic (C.A.R.) in the mid-eighties, I served with many women who had deployed in the 1950’s and 60’s. I was surprised to learn that many of these colleagues had been required to earn Masters of Divinity degrees even though they were deploying to serve as nurses and teachers. It seemed like overkill, but at that time Grace Seminary was the most trusted and qualified option for vetting and preparing candidates for on-the-field ministry.

By the time I went through Encompass’ vetting process in 1985, things had changed. No longer was Encompass requiring M.Divs. for their women missionary recruits to the C.A.R., but instead relied on three things: 1) my word; 2) my skimpy ministry resume I had built over three post-college years, and 3) what they could observe about me during two intense weeks of candidate school.

Though Encompass has one of the best and longest track records of preparing women for ministry, neither of these two options for equipping and vetting potential women candidates really fit the need. In the first case, while the classroom is excellent in terms of transferring knowledge, most would agree that it is not the ideal venue for revealing or developing a student’s character and ministry skills. And in the second case, almost anyone can “talk the talk” and “behave” for two weeks of candidate school. But, alas, these were the best “credentialing” options available back then.

ENTER WOMEN’S MINISTRY CREDENTIALING

Fast-forward thirty-five years, and the equipping and vetting of women for ministry of all kinds in Charis circles has improved but is still lacking. There is still a gaping void we need to fill with a message that says, “We are glad to learn of your passion to serve God! How can we help?” This is what women’s credentialing can do. How amazing it would be if Charis women pursuing outlets for ministry only saw green lights, “Help Wanted” signs, and open doors with welcome mats that said, “So glad you are here!”

HOW DOES IT WORK?

A woman with a passion to serve the Lord in public ministry—missions, worship arts, church administration, family counseling, or any of the many possibilities—applies to be part of Women of Grace’s credentialing process. She is assigned a mentor who will meet with her regularly (usually online), walking with her through each step of the process as she moves closer and closer to the “plumb line” (Amos 8) of competence, skills, and character. She works to ably handle the Scriptures and apply them to issues of contemporary life. Some women will complete their credentialing in a year of study, dialogue, and practice; others may take longer. The timeline can be customized to the applicant’s situation of life.

IS CREDENTIALING REALLY NEEDED?

The answer to this question may be obvious as we consider a few other related questions:

Half Team: Are we okay with just half the team showing up to serve in the great work God has entrusted to the Church, or do we need the whole team? Following the metaphor of team, it’s inconceivable to imagine any team in any sport—whether baseball, soccer, basketball, or football—being okay with playing only half their team in an important match. Definitely a losing strategy!

If Charis churches follow trends for evangelical churches, women outnumber men in our congregations. Among those women are many who would readily take a clear path offered them towards greater ministry engagement. The need is certainly there, with myriad ways for women to serve in the Church while still respecting the role (pastor-elder) biblically reserved for men. Imagine the strength Charis Fellowship and its churches would garner if more women, called and equipped, were released to passionately serve in ministries God is just waiting to bless!

Greener Pastures: Is the Charis Fellowship okay with losing our women, who are called and gifted for ministry, to other ministries and denominations who seem more ready to welcome them and find a place for them to serve? Certainly, God will call some to serve in other circles, and that’s wonderful! But if we’re honest, we are losing some great workers because of a failure to adequately welcome, inspire, and equip them.

On Their Own: Are we okay leaving so many great workers to fend for themselves as they prepare for ministry? Paul charged Timothy to “fan into flame the gift of God.” One could read this phrase and think this was for Timothy to do on his own. However, the rest of the verse completes the story. Paul says, “For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God which is in you through the laying on of my hands” (2 Timothy 1:6). Paul was very much a part of Timothy’s ministry preparedness, not only by the laying on of his hands, but also through on-the-job training, taking Timothy with him on many ministry adventures. Paul spent hours in conversation with Timothy, allowing him to observe as well as serve alongside him in ministry. Isn’t this our responsibility to the leaders we are developing?

Reproducing Excellence: In view of the fact that leaders reproduce leaders who look and act a lot like themselves, are we okay with the risk of putting out sub-par leaders knowing they will likely reproduce sub-par disciples? Though reproducing leaders is not as cut and dried as reproducing photocopies, where the flaws of the “originals” are automatically passed off to the “copies,” still, the principle is soberingly fitting. Excellent leaders are more likely to reproduce excellent leaders, while mediocre leaders will reproduce mediocrity.

Clarity and Confidence: Do we want Charis Fellowship women in ministry to have to tiptoe their way into ministry positions, not sure what they are permitted to do or how serving in excellence should look? Wouldn’t it be a huge gain if Charis women know what ministering in excellence looks like and can serve with confidence? If the answers to the above questions are no, then yes, credentialing of women for ministry is indeed needed.

A MESSAGE FOR THE 20-30s OUT THERE: I reserve this final section to women just starting out in ministry: A life of ministry, whether as an occupation or bi-vocationally, is an amazing ride! I’ve been at this for at least 37 years now and most days I wake up wondering how, of all people, I am so blessed to invest my

life in such a meaningful way! So if you feel God has called and gifted you for public ministry or leadership in a faith context, you are of all women most blessed!

A word of advice: Do your best to move steadily and patiently forward, trusting God to open doors that you are not able to open. He will send advocates your way as you keep your eyes on him, the one who has called you, not on others. And finally, for all the reasons just stated, consider credentialing as an excellent next step towards embarking on your ministry career.

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