

Ministering to the 'hidden church'

Caroline and Rob Bridgewater think through how churches can provide better pastoral support to the 'hidden church' of single women, working mothers and women in professional roles



Caroline is a cancer specialist. In her field of clinical oncology, a recent survey noted that currently around 40 per cent of consultants are female. The next generation will be very different: nearly two-thirds of the up and coming consultants in that field are women.

And it's not just in professional areas that this balance is changing. Even nine years ago, the Church of England's report *Mission Shaped Church* said that 78 per cent of all women aged 25-49 were in work and that the number of women who were single parents and in work had risen by around a third in 10 years.

Hours and patterns too have changed. Some 11 per cent of working women work more than 50 hours per week, and many jobs are now shift based. Hospitals, shops, call centres and factories all typically work around the clock.

There is no point saying that the world is changing rapidly. Change has already happened, and these are not statistics

solely for women in professional roles. The hours and the figures are the same for all kinds of women, whether teachers, cleaners, managers, sales execs or administrators. Many women hold down two jobs just to keep the household finances above water.

Rob and Caroline take a complementarian view of how the Bible sets out men's and women's roles in the church and family, and they keep this matter in review. Rob is now at Oak Hill as an ordinand, and like many other trainees or ministers, there have been times in the past where Rob's work as a part time assistant church leader has only been viable because Caroline has worked to provide enough income.

Rob has been struck by the transformation of working culture over the past 20 years and is concerned to ensure that churches are ministering well to everyone, including women in employment. This includes women in our

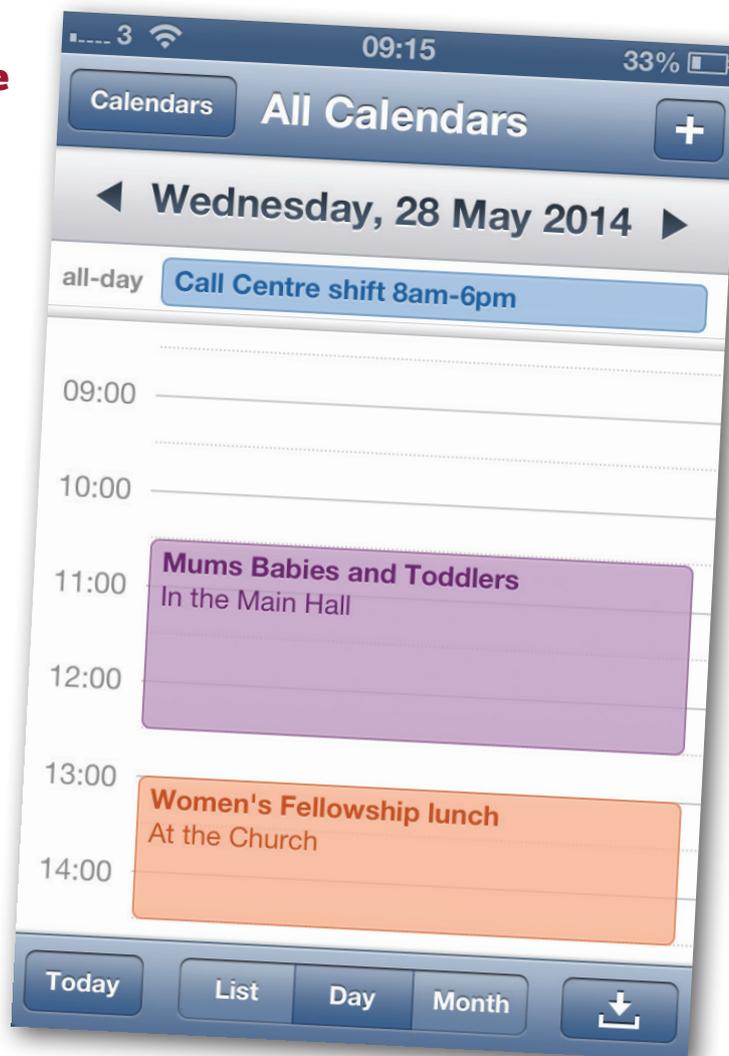
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church families, and also those outside to whom we are seeking to proclaim the gospel. There is a risk that such women might look to their peers within churches and judge them to be part of an outmoded culture, rather than a group of gospel-minded women.

Rob recently contacted a number of friends – all women working in different circumstances – to ask them about their view of the ministry of their churches. The replies were both surprising and familiar.

All demonstrated a very active enthusiasm to serve at their churches. All have been deeply involved in many areas of ministry. But *everyone* who responded indicated they at times had felt discounted or left out by their church, and doubting how they might fit.

Single women were often busy with church activities but lacked frequent true fellowship. Working mums with children of all ages recounted periods of struggle when they felt unsure of their place in the church family, and many frequently felt they were being frowned upon. And this was noted by both 'high-powered', confident women as well as those who would not describe themselves in such terms.



A quick comb of church websites shows one reason why women in employment may feel like this. In the dozens of websites Rob reviewed, every advertised women's fellowship met during the day, when women in jobs typically could not attend. In fact no church website publicised a women's fellowship meeting during the evening or early morning,

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although some churches do actually hold such meetings.

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Of course, it is right that women have fellowship together: Titus 2 is an example of this. So too families must be able to consider carefully whether or not it is right for them that mum should be employed. And surely it is right that women – particularly mums – meet together during the day when schedules allow.

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Scattered throughout both Old and New Testaments are shepherdeses, perfumers, nurses, midwives, traders and bakers. So surely a church should be ensuring their modern day equivalents are built up in their trust in Jesus. Otherwise the church family is tacitly at risk of leaving many members uncomfortable and uncertain.

The apparently straightforward solution is to arrange a regular evening meeting for women in work. Sometime this works, but it can also have the opposite effect intended, separating one group of women from another.

While there are no easy answers, there are things that seem to work. The employed women Rob and Caroline spoke

to really valued the times when a minister spoke to them specifically about these issues. Both men and women valued honesty from ministers who were clear and well reasoned about their convictions.

It also seemed to be useful for the minister to hear what pressures and stresses (for example) a woman in a call centre was under or to be made aware that many working mums feel frowned upon by their churches. Ministers do well to counteract this by assuring working mums that they truly are in the church and in Jesus.

Honest conversations have helped ministers and women with jobs find out how they might fit better into the church family. This has led to new ideas, such as forming smaller, flexible groups of women with different backgrounds to meet, read the Bible and pray together.

Is it possible, too, that fewer specific groups, not more, is the answer? If there are plenty of kids and youth groups, a 20s group, a 30s group, a seniors' lunch, a men's breakfast, a women's weekday Bible study, student fellowships and parents groups, does that cause the working woman on shifts to ask, 'Are those like me somehow in less need of a group than these others?'

Women's fellowships could be adapted to be an 'umbrella', representing the spread of women across a church family. Maybe it's worth considering a different name for the daytime women's group so that it doesn't appear to represent all the church's female population.

Rather than holding one women's fellowship meeting, perhaps it should be a group that meets in all sorts of different ways. Those who are older, or widowed, could fully get beside the young mum, or the busy shop worker, and the lawyer could get alongside the student nurse. Such a fellowship can demonstrate the gospel to other women – working or not – so that the busy social worker or the factory shift worker can see how faith in Jesus is being gloriously worked out in such women.

All this is messy and not easily solved. Nonetheless, we must not overlook such a sizeable population of our churches. We need our modern day Priscillas and Lydias to be right at the core of our church families.