

# The Leading Question?

Women in leadership in churches  
and ecumenical organisations

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Supported by:  
*Ecumenical Forum of European Christian Women  
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Women's Justice Group, Baptist Union of Great Britain*

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## **Foreword**

As chair of the BUGB Women's Justice Group I am delighted to welcome and endorse *The Leading Question?* It has been a significant piece of work to bring together women from different traditions and experiences to consider issues of gender and leadership and I hope that this report will encourage all our churches and ecumenical organisations to commit to taking further steps towards gender inclusiveness.

It is clear that the way to make real change happen is to collaborate in all the ways possible to challenge and encourage the structures we find ourselves in, and to see this as a Gospel imperative. The Women's Justice Group is pleased to have worked in partnership with the Ecumenical Forum of European Christian Women and the Jacqueline Stuyt Legacy Fund in enabling this consultation to take place and its findings to be made known.

*Rachel Haig*  
*Chair, BUGB Women's Justice Group*

## Introduction

*The Leading Question?* examines the extent to which church denominational and ecumenical structures enable the full participation of women as leaders. There has been considerable research into the relationship between gender and styles of leadership, and this includes looking at the ways in which women exercise leadership and ministry within churches. There has been less attention given to the structures of the wider church institutions with which both women and men have to engage.

This report arises from a Women in Leadership Consultation (WLC) that began in 2011. It reflects the direct experience of women in positions of leadership who came together to explore the issues that had confronted them. The members of the WLC came from different church confessions, bringing a wide diversity of leadership experience, in churches, in ecumenical structures as well as in the secular workplace and politics. The WLC reflected theologically together to identify what developments and actions could lead to ways of being and acting that are fully gender inclusive. This report offers an account of their discussions and deliberations.

The recommendations of *The Leading Question?* suggest ways in which the leadership styles of women can be more fully understood and affirmed within the life and structures of church denominations and ecumenical institutions. The report and its recommendations will be shared with the churches in Britain and throughout Europe in the hope that there can be a renewed commitment by church and ecumenical structures to make changes in response. The hope is for a wider awareness within church and ecumenical structures of key concerns and issues identified and experienced by women, and a deeper understanding of the structures that would enable churches to act and behave in ways that are gender inclusive.



## Recommendations

As a result of the findings and conclusions of the work of the 'Women and Leadership Consultation', churches of all denominations, together with ecumenical bodies, are called to take the following actions:

### **1. To commit to carry out a gender audit of their structures, processes and activities on a regular basis.**

If awareness of the potential and possibilities of gender equality in leadership is to be recognised, the continuing failure to involve women needs to be named and recognised. A regular audit allows this to be done.

### **2. To encourage and enable the use of liturgical language that is properly sensitive to gender.**

Language is a crucial issue – especially the language used in worship and how we speak of God. We believe there is no reason why our language cannot be inclusive, so ensuring that all know they belong within the worshipping community.

### **3. To identify ways of pro-actively ensuring the presence of women at the highest levels of decision making.**

This could take several forms. It might involve quotas on committees and governance bodies; it could mean bringing women into chairing, facilitating and leadership roles that are not dependent on conventional church hierarchies; it might lead to models of co-leadership involving both women and men. However it is done, it is vital that the voices of women are heard.

### **4. To develop mentoring schemes for women.**

It is clear from the stories heard and told that women need support and encouragement in order to take on leadership responsibilities. But there are women with experience of leadership who can provide this, offering the possibility of mentoring schemes.





**5. To ensure that there are opportunities for women's stories to be heard in ways that model effectively the strong link between worship and action.**

Women have particular experiences of injustice – including abuse, poverty, violence and intolerance – together with understandings of how to respond. These need to be recognised and heard.

**6. To seek out Christian women in leadership positions in secular organisations and ensure that there are opportunities for such experience to influence and challenge church structures.**

Issues of gender and leadership are not confined to the church. The church can learn from secular organisations, and this should be actively encouraged.

**7. To ensure that there is a framework in place whereby women who experience harassment, bullying and abuse are able to safely disclose and receive protection through suitable processes.**

The consultation uncovered many examples of such behaviour. There is a need to have clear and safe processes in place that can be accessed whenever necessary.

## The Nature of Leadership

What is good leadership? How often do those in leadership positions, both women and men, consider their own approach to leadership and open their thinking beyond what could be described as conventional male models of leadership?

The WLC examined their personal experience as leaders and the leadership of others, and concluded that the most vital aspects of leadership are:

- To give inspiration
- To have self belief with self awareness
- To show an awareness of power and the misuse of power
- The ability to articulate and hold the vision
- Embodying the values of an organisation in order to ensure its authenticity
- An ability to nurture people
- Communication
- Personal resilience
- Emotional intelligence
- Identifying with people
- Servant-heartedness
- An ability to adapt personal style to the task
- To responsibly use power to decide how to put questions, or if they should be put at all, and what the timing should be.

The WLC also identified areas of difficulty, making the observation that leaders do not need to be perfect. Whilst women and men may aspire to perfection, for women this can become a significant barrier to moving forward and a source of intense pressure. Women can also be culturally encouraged to develop 'a need to please' that may be disempowering. The WLC asked questions about the relationship between leadership and management, considering that this was an area in which the churches particularly struggle.

A church leader's sense of identity develops during a long process of formation, involving forms of discernment, selection and training as well as ongoing ministry. During all that time, the leader's gendered identity will influence both their personal self-image and the way they model ministry and discipleship.

Church leadership has until relatively recently been largely a male domain; so women in every Christian denomination are likely to be more experienced in receiving formal ministry from men than men are from women. Women, unlike men, have always needed to exercise their ministry in some degree of cooperation with, or without, approval from men. Women are used to working with and for men who are regarded as their equals or superiors, whereas men may have little comparative experience of women in these roles.

Where church communities of any denomination have opted to accept women in leadership roles, they necessarily have to address some basic issues:

- Historically male-dominated structures and cultures
- Different approaches of women and men in relating together
- Leadership and ministry styles that overlook or undervalue models that don't conform to traditional male patterns
- Promoting working relationships between the sexes that are mutually supportive and respectful
- The greater degree of diversity present in our churches
- Modelling effectively the strong link between worship and action.

The WLC found many of our questions remained unanswered, such as 'what is the relationship between male dominated patterns of leadership, power and money?'

Leadership is often judged against traditional models that may not have benefited from what women offer and bring. The WLC recognised this, affirming the gender differences that exist in both leadership styles and across many cultures. There are a great range of human behaviours, from ways of thinking and speaking, to working in groups. Gender differences are evident in the way women and men define and use power, how they approach leadership, how they solve problems, relate to one another in groups and learn new skills.

There is an inherent challenge for women who are often socialised to be peacemakers and conflict avoiders, when leadership requires the ability to cope with conflict and to carry hard decisions. Every culture has popular beliefs and prejudices about each sex, and there is a danger that myths can turn into self-fulfilling prophecies. For leaders of both sexes to work effectively together they need some understanding of gendered differences, either in the way people actually behave or in the assumptions and popular beliefs about such differences.





## Making an assessment

Whilst some quantitative data is collected in individual denominations and ecumenical bodies about how many women are in leadership roles, measuring – for example – gender balance on committees, there is little qualitative data about the direct experience of women within the structures. Thus, in 2008 the Women's Justice Group of the Baptist Union of Great Britain undertook a detailed 'gender mapping' exercise of the proceedings that took place at its main annual gathering, the Baptist Assembly.

Observers were sent to all the various sessions (the main plenary and business meetings, the seminars and interest group meetings, the worship and fringe gatherings) with a number of questions to answer and space for reflection on the overall experience. These included the basic questions that might be expected, such as: Did the session model leadership by both women and men? However, just as importantly it asked a number of deeper questions about the proceedings, such as:

- Was the language used gender inclusive?
- Who took the lead during the course of the session, and why?
- Were women helped and enabled to participate along with men (for example, in question and discussion time)?
- What power dynamics were at work (for example, in the way leaders dressed)?

At the Conference of European Churches General Assembly in 2009, the Ecumenical Forum of European Christian Women undertook a similar exercise.

This kind of assessment of the Baptist Assembly produced a comprehensive report with a number of recommendations, highlighting the difficulties faced by women seeking to engage with the structures, notably in positions of leadership. It revealed the journey still to be made to ensure the full participation of women, especially in worship, and how subtly discrimination can work at times.

The report fed into a renewed debate about women in ministry, leading to a publication outlining the story of women in Baptist ministry. A resolution was brought to the Council of the Baptist Union of Great Britain agreeing further steps 'to discern ways of addressing barriers to the full participation of women in all forms of leadership within BUGB.'



The WLC was of the opinion that such mapping or audit exercises are useful and important in identifying and seeking to change underlying discrimination and marginalisation.



***Recommendation 1***

To commit to carry out a gender audit of their structures, processes and activities on a regular basis.

If awareness of the potential and possibilities of gender equality in leadership is to be recognised, the continuing failure to involve women needs to be named and recognised. A regular audit allows this to be done.

## Liturgy and language

Language is important. A good deal of discussion by the WLC revolved around the issue of language and liturgy: how does gendered language in God-talk affect sense of self and personal experience of worship? How does language interact with concepts of gender and leadership?

A church leader carries a whole range of symbolic meanings around the nature of God and the Church; and these symbols will differ somewhat depending on the sex of the leader, since women's bodies, their experiences and their ways of knowing are different from men. The sexes differ in terms not only of physiological function, but also of inherited and learned traits and cultural influences; so we experience the world in different ways that reach beyond biological sex.

A great deal of the language and ritual of religion is gendered, so there are distinct symbolic meanings associated with each sex. The way we use gendered language in our God-talk can have a profound influence on how we understand ourselves as human beings, as Church, and as leaders. For instance, women are often linked in thought and language with nature, sexuality, motherhood and birth. We talk in English, for example, of 'mother earth' and 'mother nature'; and we symbolically link nurturing care with the maternal body when we speak of 'the milk of human kindness'. Symbols around birthing, nurturing, caring and flourishing apply most readily to women, although they are accessible to everyone.

Sexual differences are treated asymmetrically in European cultures, where culture, thought, language and worldview spring largely from the dominant male imagination. God has been imagined by and large in the male image. Identity, logic and rationality are symbolically male, and man is taken as central and normative. An exclusively male priesthood perpetuated this image, implying that maleness was more closely associated with divinity. Women were typically barred from this form of Christian leadership.

Woman in this context always becomes the 'other', the binary opposite. Femaleness is often overlooked and undervalued, and sometimes demeaned. Historically women have been seen as less in the image of God and inferior and subordinate to men, sometimes less than fully human. Although legislation is now in place in Britain to safeguard women's rights and equality in the workplace, the legacy of this asymmetrical thinking still shows itself in Church structures, in God-talk and in our sense of gendered identity. It is not insignificant that churches are allowed to discriminate as part of their religious exemption from equalities legislation.

The understanding of leadership in the Church is naturally informed by scripture and tradition and the way these are interpreted in the current cultural context. Again, there has been an asymmetric treatment of the sexes. Both Christian scripture and tradition have often offered a polarised view of womanhood, women's bodies and femaleness: the unique, virginal, asexual, saintly figure of Mary on the one hand, and the sinful Eve and her descendants on the other, where female sexuality and sensuality are linked with impurity, temptation and danger.

Such contrasting images don't bear much resemblance to the lives of ordinary women's experience. Neither do they affirm the real, sensuous female body (embodied, for instance, in the female church leader) as a focus for encountering the sacred. One comment made by the WLC was that fixed images limit our understanding of God. It is only relatively recently that some of the many feminine images and narratives that can enrich worship and spirituality have been recovered, and have been included in – for example – preaching, hymns, prayers, lectionary choices and liturgy.

Although much progress has been made, there is still a need to find ways of hearing, understanding and responding to the Christian story that encourage a more inclusive culture where sexual equality is recognised and promoted. The task of tackling negative symbolic meanings associated with women is helped where leadership roles are shared between both women and men. Leaders who take sexual difference seriously will be aware of gendered symbolic associations and will seek to uphold femaleness as well as maleness as a valid focus for the divine, in prayer, teaching, worship and pastoral ministry.

The WLC noted that where inclusive God-talk is used, a tangibly different atmosphere is created. Women leaders can help to enrich and renew old religious symbols and language so that everyone, including women, as well as others historically on the outside, can flourish and reach their full potential as children of God.

This is one way that the Church can be the welcoming, embracing community that Jesus modelled in his ministry. But it requires all leaders, female and male, to be aware of the potency and potential for change that comes with attention to sexual difference and a commitment to inclusive language.



## ***Recommendation 2***

To encourage and enable the use of liturgical language that is properly sensitive to gender.

Language is a crucial issue – especially the language used in worship and how we speak of God. We believe there is no reason why our language cannot be inclusive, so ensuring that all know they belong within the worshipping community.



## Personal identity and barriers to progress

Our sense of identity and self-worth have a lot to do with our gender – it influences not just physiology and reproductive function, but the whole way we operate in the world around us. And this is a factor (sometimes a barrier) to women in leadership positions.


Legal, economic, social, political and religious structures have historically operated according to the reason and logic of male-dominated cultures, in which women have been largely excluded from the processes of forming the images and symbols which order and express thought, and the culture in which those images and symbols operate. Every woman's sense of her own identity, including her perceived capacity as a focus for the presence of God, has been shaped by these learned assumptions about the differences between men and women. So women's development of a sense of self is inevitably different to that of men.

Typically, many women still struggle today with the question, 'Who am I?' Women may ground their sense of self primarily in nurturance and care-taking. The dominant culture encourages men rather than women to put reaching ambitious goals above care-taking and intimate personal relatedness. Many women struggle to address the constant demands of maintaining and nurturing relationships, whilst at the same time aspiring towards self-acceptance and self-definition as an autonomous individual.

The notion that assertiveness and independence, intellectual aspirations, physical prowess and sexual expression are unfeminine is being continually challenged. Yet there remain strong cultural pressures on women to devalue themselves, to see themselves as having secondary status, to be passive and dependent in their thinking, language and behaviour. These factors may all influence the way women feel about taking on leadership roles.

Gender and identity are challenging factors in Church leadership because this is an area of conflicting beliefs and mores. Christian women are part of an institution that is steeped in customs and rites that have been mostly male-led and sanctioned and controlled by men. There is still only a partial and patchy acceptance of women's full leadership. A woman called to a leadership role against this cultural and historical background is likely to question whether this is appropriate, and if so whether she can survive such a role whilst remaining authentically herself.

A woman considering a leadership position may be confronted with others' bemusement, disapproval, even hostility, simply by virtue of being female. If she pursues her calling to leadership she may be



criticised for indulging in an 'unfeminine' degree of ambition, stridency or strong-headedness. Such challenges were very familiar to the members of the WLC.

To enable others fully to flourish in their Christian life, any leader needs to feel fairly secure in their own sense of identity and calling, and to feel accepted within a given community. A barrier here for a female leader can be uncertainty as to whether she is, in fact, welcome. Even where church communities have agreed to accept women's leadership, there may remain a culture of suspicion or non-acceptance amongst fellow leaders, colleagues or other members. On top of this her learned sense of self may tell her that as a woman she is inferior, subordinate and secondary in status and ability. She may be aware that others in her community believe this to be so. And she may fear that to strive against such ingrained attitudes would mark her out as unfeminine.

The WLC strongly believes that female leaders should 'be themselves', and make their own distinct contribution towards the ministry of the Church. However, this can be difficult when Christians serving alongside them do not accept who they are, or respond to them with measured disagreement or even outright hostility. With such barriers to negotiate, a female church leader must find deep resources in her sense of identity, and develop a strong sense of self-worth and security so as to withstand outright non-acceptance or more nuanced forms of exclusion or hostility.

A Church that is truly committed to the interests of all people lives out its commitment in the inclusivity of its leadership. That means doing more than merely acknowledging women in leadership roles. If it is to enable both men and women to value one another and act effectively together, the Church must tackle any obstacles to professional ministerial development and to personal flourishing, and promote a pastoral climate that is both supportive to both sexes and conducive to joint ministry. To achieve this, women in leadership need to encounter not just passive tolerance but positive acknowledgment and active, practical affirmation and support from their female and male colleagues.

Ecumenical bodies, such as the Conference of European Churches, have attempted to achieve balances between women and men within their governance structures, such as the central committee. The WLC observed that this has proved to be difficult. An example of the difficulty is that ordained women can only possibly be drawn from churches that ordain women – and where ordained women can reach the highest leadership positions.

The WLC also questioned whether it would ever be likely for an ordained woman to be appointed to a role such as General Secretary of an ecumenical organisation when her status would be untenable for some of the member churches. This major barrier to progress needs to be openly acknowledged.

There has to be a willingness to identify ways whereby the voices of women can be heard and it may require creativity and flexibility to do so. To change the status quo inevitably needs both a certain amount of letting go and a commitment to trying out different ways of working that bring women into the room and around the table.

### ***Recommendation 3***

To identify ways of pro-actively ensuring the presence of women at the highest levels of decision making.

This could take several forms. It might involve quotas on committees and governance bodies; it could mean bringing women into chairing, facilitating and leadership roles that are not dependent on conventional church hierarchies; it might lead to models of co-leadership involving both women and men. However it is done, it is vital that the voices of women are heard.





## Role models

There are very few points of reference or role models for women, because women have in the main occupied leadership positions for so short a time and in small numbers. Without role models it is difficult for more women to come forward. The members of the WLC realised, significantly, that 'we are the role models'. This prompted a challenge as to what role models women offer to other women and how this could be developed.

The members of the WLC shared why they had remained in leadership roles and considered what had enabled this tenacity despite the negative experiences some had faced. There is a need to develop better ways to communicate such survival to other women. There was also an awareness that other women could either see how difficult leadership was for women and walk away or believe a woman leader to be so far removed from themselves they may think that they could not manage to 'be like that'. It seems for leaders there can be a double bind where 'being myself' is vital as is 'having courage to do it my way'. But is the 'my way' a woman's strong feminine side or her shadow? Often women have to adapt themselves out of necessity and conform to a male paradigm.

There is a strong need to challenge the 'virtuous woman' syndrome (silent, submissive, humble etc) as this restricts women's development and prevents them realising their full potential. Women may feel reluctant to appear strident or self promoting. Women are often judged by different criteria from men, such as appearance or marital status. On the other hand women also find themselves judged negatively against male characteristics and style.

Scripture itself offers some good role models for women in leadership but often these are hidden by structural choices such as what appears in the lectionary and what is chosen for inclusion in our hymn books. In assessing the different levels of leadership where women are present it can be seen that the model is so usually male and macho it reveals the stained glass ceiling to be both legal and cultural. It is an issue that in some denominations most non-stipendiary posts are filled by women meaning that the age of entry to ministry for women is often older than that of men so that women accrue fewer years of experience.

Drawing on female role models from different sources is critical in enabling a transforming culture for women's leadership. Women's stories need to be consciously offered, breaking the typical mould of male leadership styles.



Male colleagues also need to recognise, understand and promote women and femaleness, choosing examples and illustrations that restore a balance. Role models also need to demonstrate diversity beyond that of female/male and not be limited to a white, heterosexual stereotype.

The struggle is not over! It is vital to promote support networks, female mentors and female role-models.

#### ***Recommendation 4***

To develop mentoring schemes for women.

It is clear from the stories heard and told that women need support and encouragement in order to take on leadership responsibilities. But there are women with experience of leadership who can provide this, offering the possibility of mentoring schemes.

## Women and wider issues of justice

The WLC asked how leadership (male or female) could take gender issues seriously, particularly where they relate to abuse, poverty and violence. How does the concept of gender justice fit in the overall concept of justice? For example, when food justice and poverty are discussed in churches the specific impact and relationship between such issues and the lives of women are not often demonstrated. It is shocking that one in three women will be raped or beaten in her lifetime, but does the church acknowledge or respond to this? The AIDS crisis surely demonstrates the need for women to have support in their sexual and reproductive rights, and we are still well short of the 5.5% annual reduction in maternal mortality set by Millennium Development Goal 5. In the struggle against poverty, violence and intolerance what does the church do to demonstrate God as righteous, just and merciful?

The World Bank states that there are 'no areas in the world where men and women are equal'. Economic, social and political inequality is widespread, not only globally but also in Britain, a place where there is protective legislation. In claiming religious exemption from legislation that ensures the equality of women and by failing to talk about, or acknowledge, such issues, churches become guilty of condoning the status quo. Gender and justice issues are intertwined. The work undertaken by agencies such as Christian Aid has already moved the debate significantly but often in the margins of church life.

The reality is that many of the most basic justice issues present in the world have a particular gender perspective that should not be ignored and yet is frequently forgotten. The WLC believes that greater gender inclusiveness would be a way of helping the church more fully understand and respond to such issues of justice.

### ***Recommendation 5***

To ensure that there are opportunities for women's stories to be heard in ways that model effectively the strong link between worship and action.

Women have particular experiences of injustice – including abuse, poverty, violence and intolerance – together with understandings of how to respond. These need to be recognised and heard.

## Experience of leadership both lay and ordained

In coming together from differing traditions the WLC considered the meanings of gender and leadership in churches that don't ordain women and in those that do. Additionally there are different leadership experiences for women who are lay and ordained. The WLC members shared their personal reflections of the task of leading from these different perspectives and where the stresses have been.

Despite leadership being seen as powerful and maybe glamorous, it is often boring, mundane and hard work. It is especially difficult for women leaders to keep going and remain positive when having to work with an additional layer of prejudice and discrimination. Even in churches where there is a long experience of women in church leadership, negative experiences are still common.

There is a theory that there is a fear of the feminisation of the church. The implication is that in achieving greater gender inclusiveness the church won't be attractive to men – and therefore will lose its power and status in society. The WLC reflected that Jesus took contextually feminine roles that were passive, including peacemaking, washing feet and offering hospitality. Is this a model of servant leadership that the church has expected only women to fulfil?

The WLC considered the extent to which the acceptance of women in leadership is theological or cultural. Is it that the church needs to catch up with secular organisations or are there many of the same problems for women in secular occupations? With a range of experiences both within and outside church structures amongst the members of the WLC it is important to encourage leadership of the church to be open to insights from outside.

The church has much to learn from the secular world, not least around issues of accountability and transparency. It is curious that the Church can sometimes demand exemption from aspects of human rights legislation and yet is often lagging behind progress in this area. The Church can appear to see itself as having a monopoly on vocation and calling and yet many women express their Christian commitment in leadership roles outside of it.



### ***Recommendation 6***

To seek out Christian women in leadership positions in secular organisations and ensure that there are opportunities for such experience to influence and challenge church structures.

Issues of gender and leadership are not confined to the church. The church can learn from secular organisations, and this should be actively encouraged.



## Harassment, bullying and abuse

Women in positions of leadership may have experienced harassment and abuse whilst growing up within the church. Moreover, it is not unusual for women to experience bullying and abuse from those whom they are leading.

Church and ecumenical organisations still struggle to have suitable processes in place to support women in these circumstances. Disclosure is often met with disbelief and the victim can become marginalised as the person 'causing trouble'. The culture can sometimes seem to be one whereby, by being a woman in a leadership role, you are 'asking for it'. It is only by comprehensively changing the overall culture to a gender inclusive one that such abuse can be prevented. It is vitally important for there to be processes in place to ensure women can be supported appropriately.

### ***Recommendation 7***

To ensure that there is a framework in place whereby women who experience harassment, bullying and abuse are able to safely disclose and receive protection through suitable processes.

The consultation uncovered many examples of such behaviour. There is a need to have clear and safe processes in place that can be accessed whenever necessary.

## Concluding reflections

The WLC considered the Trinity as a model for working together in leadership. The values of inclusiveness, interdependence and collaboration are revealed in the Trinitarian three way interrelationship. Without hierarchy or privilege, no opposition or subordination, each member is equally regarded, respected and loved by the others. Whilst recognising that the Trinitarian model couldn't be mapped straight onto our human community, the WLC felt it could offer a pattern of leadership, influencing how we form community life from language to worship, mission and pastoral work.

It shows that autonomy and connectedness are not mutually exclusive. It means seeking to end any beliefs and practices that perpetuate discrimination against any particular individual or group and therefore pulling the relationships out of balance. The emphasis is on interdependence rather than hierarchy, collaboration and mutuality rather than competition and individualism. It means honouring and nurturing a variety of ways of being and behaving so as to harness the best in everyone. It means working co-operatively, as equal members of Christ's body, in building a Kingdom-shaped Church.

The debate needs to continue and the diverse experiences of women need to be fully encompassed in the debate. There are difficulties with leadership and structures for both women and men, and we must recognise the need for healing in these processes. Women need to know their power and be empowered, and that means letting go. It means being liberated from inappropriate and outdated cultural assumptions and expectations around femaleness and narrow, superficial interpretations of scripture that constrain women's aspirations and self-worth. The WLC believes that for women to discover their own power is vital. Leadership comes from a sense of empowerment (it is not the other way round). When people are free, they have power.

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*The mermaid image has been chosen to illustrate The Living Question? because, whilst the mythical female figure of the mermaid is often seen as threatening and dangerous, luring sailors to their death, this has not always been so. At Zennor parish church in West Cornwall, there is a late 15th century carving of a mermaid on one of the pew ends. The mermaid was seen as a symbol of Christ. Her two natures, half human and half fish, echoed Christ's humanity and divinity. The mermaid can still be seen as a beautiful symbol of our faith – of who Christ is. She speaks of living with ambiguity and mystery, of the importance of taking risk and calling us all out of complacency.*





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