The problem of Mennonite worship leadership becoming "women's work"

Sarah Kathleen Johnson

As a theologian and pastor, I celebrate the opportunities women have today to give leadership in the church, and especially in corporate worship, that were not available to previous generations and that in many settings remain limited.[1] However, it is necessary to look beyond the mere presence of women in leadership and consider the forms of leadership that women provide and the ways in which this leadership is valued by the church community. In this essay, I explore the possibility that worship leadership in some Mennonite congregations has become a form of "women's work" in ways that are problematic.

"Worship leadership," in the context of this discussion, refers to the role of designing and leading portions of corporate worship other than music and preaching. Depending on the congregation, this may include welcoming worshipers and facilitating announcements, offering prayers and readings, providing verbal introductions to songs, praying a congregational prayer, leading a time focused on children, and inviting participation in ritual actions, among other possibilities. In many settings, even if the worship leader does not give public leadership to these elements, they are responsible for coordinating the involvement of others. The worship leader is typically not the preacher or the song leader and is often a volunteer. This use of the term "worship leader" is specific to predominantly white Mennonite congregations that employ patterns of worship sometimes called "traditional," meaning they consist of a series of juxtaposed elements, usually centered on a sermon and drawing on mu-

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1 "Women" in this context refers to individuals who name and perform their gender identity in this way. The focus on "women" and "men" is not intended to limit gender to binary categories.

sic from a hymnal. In the context of an hour-long "traditional" worship service, approximately twenty minutes may be dedicated to preaching, twenty minutes to singing, and twenty minutes to other acts of worship facilitated by the worship leader. There are many other ways that the term "worship leader" is used, including in reference to all leaders involved in all aspects of worship, which is how it is employed in the *Voices Together: Worship Leader Edition*, and in reference to the primary musician shaping the sung portion of a "contemporary" worship service—these uses are outside the scope of this analysis.[2]

Below I draw on my experience as the worship resources editor for *Voices Together*—a hymnal and worship book intended for use in Mennonite Church Canada and Mennonite Church USA that was published in 2020[3]—for which I spent four years intentionally listening and learning about Mennonite worship practices through visiting congregations, facilitating focus groups, testing material at events, and coordinating dozens of other leaders involved in this project.[4] I begin by situating a discussion of women in worship leadership within broader conversations about gender and *Voices Together*. I then outline the sociological category of "women's work" and explore how these dynamics may be present in Mennonite worship leadership.

Gender and *Voices Together*

In this discussion, I assume that gender is socially constructed through discourse, especially through repeated rituals that cite social norms and that can either reinforce or subvert these norms.[5] Within this framework, worship is a significant site for the performance and construction of gender in Mennonite communities. Who leads worship, how worship is led, and the content of worship all have implications for the ways gender is understood and embodied.

Gender was a significant category of analysis in the process of creating *Voices Together*. The Mennonite Worship and Song Committee initially

2 Sarah Kathleen Johnson, ed., *Voices Together: Worship Leader Edition* (Harrisonburg, VA: MennoMedia, 2020).

3 *Voices Together* (Harrisonburg, VA: MennoMedia, 2020).

4 I am grateful for initial feedback I received on this paper at the Women Doing Theology Conference held at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Elkhart, Indiana, in November 2018.

5 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

called to this work consisted of six men and six women.[6] In discussions surrounding the just and faithful use of language, the committee considered how to represent the gender of humans and God. We employed an expansive case-by-case approach aimed at balance across the collection, which resulted in the introduction of stronger feminine language for God.[7] We also attended to the gender of text writers and composers and made a significant effort to include more songs by women from across time and in a diversity of musical idioms. This resulted in 27.2 percent of sung texts and 18.4 percent of tunes in *Voices Together* being written by women, almost double the number than the previous collection, *Hymnal: A Worship Book*.[8] In terms of how language and imagery is used in songs and the sources of songs, the focus was *increasing* the representation of women. To put this in theological and theoretical terms, these actions were directed toward constructing an understanding of women as created in the image of God and as creators of the song of the church.

The story of spoken worship resources is different: women are overrepresented rather than underrepresented. As in previous hymnals, *Voices Together* includes words for worship alongside songs.[9] Although spoken

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6 The Mennonite Worship and Song Committee consisted of Adam M. L. Tice (text editor), Benjamin Bergy (music editor), Sarah Kathleen Johnson (worship resources editor), Darryl Neustaedter Barg, Paul Dueck, Mike Erb, Katie Graber, Emily Grimes, Tom Harder, SaeJin Lee, Anneli Loepp Thiessen, Cynthia Neufeld Smith, and Allan Rudy-Froese (as a later addition). Bradley Kauffman was the general editor and project director. For more on the process of creating *Voices Together*, see Bradley Kauffman, "A Hard, Holy Work: The Making of 'Voices Together,'" *Anabaptist World*, 29 June 2020, https://anabaptistworld.org/hard-holy-work-making-voices-together/.

7 For more on language in *Voices Together*, see Sarah Kathleen Johnson and Adam M. L. Tice, "Our Journey with Just and Faithful Language: The Story of a Twenty-First Century Mennonite Hymnal," *The Hymn* 73, no.2 (Spring 2022); and the online resource and discussion guide "Expansive Language in Voices Together: Gendered Images of God" (Harrisonburg: MennoMedia, 2020), http://voicestogetherhymnal.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Expansive-Language-in-VT-2.pdf.

8 Anneli Loepp Thiessen, "Noon Hour Concert: Still Singing—Women Composers in the 'Voices Together' Hymnal," Conrad Grebel University College, 27 January 2021, https://uwaterloo.ca/grebel/events/noon-hour-concert-still-singing-women-composers-and-voices.

9 Ten percent of pages and 310 of the 1,069 items in *Voices Together* are non-musical worship resources, including spoken words, diagrams depicting American Sign Language, and works of visual art. *The Mennonite Hymnal* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1969); *Hymnal: A Worship Book* (Scottdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1992); *Sing the Journey* (Scottdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing Network, 2005); *Sing the Story* (Scottdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing Network, 2007).

material approaches imagery and language in similar ways to songs, in contrast to songs, women are *overrepresented* as authors of spoken resources attributed to individuals.[10] In *Hymnal: A Worship Book,* 65 percent of resources associated with a single author are written by women, which is 24 percent of the total number of spoken resources in the collection, compared to the 13 percent written by men. We recognized this tendency, and in *Voices Together*, 53 percent of resources associated with a single author are written by women, which is 20 percent of the spoken resources, compared to the 18 percent written by men. However, 34 percent of the words for worship attributed to men are historical resources attributed to figures such as Augustine of Hippo or Menno Simons, compared to only 8 percent of resources attributed to historical women. Therefore, women's voices are especially dominant in contemporary words for worship. This is indicative of broader patterns in Mennonite worship leadership.

Gender and Mennonite worship leadership

It was clear throughout the process of developing *Voices Together* that it is primarily women who are involved in Mennonite worship leadership in the narrow sense outlined above. While this rings true anecdotally at the congregational level, the process of creating centralized resources revealed the pervasiveness of this pattern. The vast majority of the authors who submitted spoken resources for consideration were women (81 percent). When forming worship resources screening teams in four regions to select resources for possible inclusion from published collections and submissions, we were not able to identify a male screening team leader and had to deliberately encourage each team to include at least one male member. When bringing together a group to develop resources for central practices, such as baptism, communion, and child blessing, it was women who had primary specialization in worship, and men who were poets, pastors, and preachers, which reflects that it is principally Mennonite women who have studied worship at the doctoral level.[11] When we sought to identify writers to commission for specific resources, almost all potential candidates were women. Similar patterns have played out in the reception of the hymnal. Of the thirty-four students who registered for the short course Worship Leader's Introduction to *Voices Together* at

10 Many of the spoken worship resources included in these collections are drawn from Scripture, are attributed to organizations such as denominations, or are anonymous.

11 The central practices group consisted of Irma Fast Dueck, Heidi Miller, Sarah Kathleen Johnson, Isaac Villegas, Adam M. L. Tice, and Allan Rudy-Froese.

Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary in 2020, only two were men. In contrast, thirteen men were among the thirty-six students who registered for the short course Song Leader's Introduction to *Voices Together*.

It is difficult to know why it is primarily women who are involved in Mennonite worship leadership. One possibility is that this is an aspect of church life where there has been space for women to have a public voice. Only 30 percent of active pastors in Mennonite Church USA are women, for example, which suggests that the majority of sermons continue to be preached by men.[12] The dominance of women's voices in worship leadership is something to celebrate. It significantly increases gender diversity in public leadership. It gives women a strong hand in shaping the theology of the church at the local and denominational levels. It is empowering, especially for those who find worship leadership joyful and life-giving work. It is still work, however, and concerningly, it seems to have become "women's work."

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"Women's work"

In the sociological literature, "women's work" is a term that is employed to describe the gendered division of labor, especially in relation to "pink collar jobs"—professions dominated by women, such as nursing, teaching, secretarial work, childcare, and household labor, and that are often oriented toward coordination, hospitality, and caregiving.[13] Female-dominated professions tend to be associated with low status, poor pay, narrow job content, and poor prospects for promotion,[14] and are part of what drives an ongoing gender pay gap.[15] Which professions are considered

12 Mennonite Church USA, 2021.

13 Louise Kapp Howe, *Pink Collar Workers: Inside the World of Women's Work* (New York: Vintage Books, 1970).

14 Catherine Truss, Kerstin Alfes, Amanda Shantz, and Amanda Rosewarne, "Still in the Ghetto? Experiences of Secretarial Work in the 21st Century," *Gender, Work, and Organization* 20, no. 4 (2013): 349–61.

15 Amanda Barroso and Anna Brown, "Gender Pay Gap in U.S. Held Steady in 2020," Pew Research Center, 25 May 2021, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/05/25/gender-pay-gap-facts/; Anna Louie Sussman, "'Women's Work' Can

women's work is not stable but shifts over time with the "feminization" of different segments of the workforce. Certain professions can become women's work through increasing involvement of women in an industry, leading to changing perceptions of these positions: "the influx of women into certain professions has coincided with a perceived decline in salaries and status."[16] At the same time, which jobs are considered women's work is less about the demographics of a profession in a certain setting and more about the cultural value of different forms of work.[17] Two further characteristics of women's work relevant to this discussion are that it is often "concealed labor," in that the process or product of work is invisible,[18] and "emotional labor," in that it involves the management of feelings in a public facing role.[19]

Worship leadership as "women's work"

Worship leadership in Mennonite communities shares many of the characteristics of women's work. It has some traits in common with other female-dominated professions, including an emphasis on coordination, hospitality, and caregiving. For example, in many congregations, the worship leader coordinates numerous other people contributing to the service, serves as a host during the worship gathering, and cares for participants as well as others involved in leadership. Emotional and concealed labor characterize this low status work in which there is little opportunity for advancement.

The *emotional labor* of worship leadership consists of inducing or suppressing one's own emotions to tend to the emotional needs of the community and respond to events that occur during worship. One of the ways this is often described is that worship leaders need to "get out of the way" or be "transparent" so that others can enter into worship: "the less one sees or notices the leader and the more one sees or notices God, the better

No Longer Be Taken for Granted," *New York Times*, 13 November 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/13/opinion/sunday/women-pay-gender-gap.html.

16 Brooke Erin Duffy and Becca Schwartz, "Digital 'Women's Work?': Job Recruitment Ads and the Feminization of Social Media Employment," *New Media and Society*, 20, no. 8 (2018): 2975.

17 Duffy and Schwartz, "Digital 'Women's Work?'," 2976.

18 Duffy and Schwartz, "Digital 'Women's Work?,'" 2974.

19 Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).

the congregation is served."[20] This dynamic points not only to emotional labor but also to one of the ways in which the work of worship leaders can become invisible.

Much of the work of worship leadership can be considered *concealed labor*. Drawing on the example of the philosopher Husserl turning to his writing table to do the work of philosophy, Sara Ahmed describes this dynamic:

> *Being oriented toward the writing table not only relegates other rooms in the house to the background, but also might depend on the work done to keep the desk clear. The desk that is clear is one that is ready for writing. One might even consider the domestic work that must have taken place for Husserl to turn to the writing table, and to be writing on the table, and to keep that table as the object of his attention. We can draw here on the long history of feminist scholarship about the politics of housework: about the ways in which women, as wives and servants, do the work required to keep such spaces available for men and the work they do.*[21]

The worship leader does the concealed labor, the organizing, hosting, and perhaps even preparing the physical space, that is necessary "to keep the desk clear," to clear the space for the community to do the work of worship, or even "to keep the pulpit clear"—which is more likely to be occupied by a man. The work of worship leader at its best involves as much theological preparation, knowledge of the community, and communication skill as the work of the preacher, in addition to other more varied and complex activities; however, this work is often unacknowledged. When worship leaders are affirmed, it is usually in reference to the public elements of leadership, not the tremendous amount of thoughtful work behind the scenes.

Worship leading is *low status* work, especially compared to preaching and song leading. In Mennonite settings, worship is often thought of primarily in terms of singing and preaching, with little attention given to a multitude of other elements or the delicate work of weaving together

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20 June Alliman Yoder, Marlene Kropf, and Rebecca Slough, *Preparing Sunday Dinner: A Collaborative Approach to Worship and Preaching* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2005), 222.

21 Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 30–31.

corporate praise and prayer. As someone who both preaches and leads worship regularly, I receive more substantial engagement and affirmation in response to mediocre sermons than to strong worship leadership. In the sociological literature, the lower status of women's work is evident in lower pay. While Mennonite congregations often compensate pastors, guest preachers, and occasionally musicians, worship leaders rarely receive any financial renumeration. For example, I am often offered an honorarium as a guest preacher but not a guest worship leader, even when I dedicate as much time to shaping the service in collaboration with other leaders as to preparing the sermon. This is also visible in how the creators of material used in worship are compensated, with centralized systems in place to compensate songwriters (CCLI and One License), the majority of whom are men, without analogous systems for the authors of spoken resources.

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Finally, there is *little opportunity for growth or advancement* for worship leaders. One way this is manifest is in an absence of resources and training. This is a difficult reality for me to name as someone who is grateful to be involved in developing substantial resources in recent years.[22] However, music, not worship resources, was the driving force behind *Voices Together*. Together in Worship, an online collection of free resources form Anabaptist sources, was a grassroots development.[23] The Anabaptist Worship Network is primarily a volunteer endeavor. There are no denominational staff in the United States or Canada focused on supporting worship. Worship is not central subject matter in our theological schools. The level of training that we expect of our preachers in theology or of our song leaders in music greatly exceeds that of those who lead worship. The difficult work of worship leadership is primarily undertaken by generous and dedicated yet largely untrained and unsupported volunteers. As with other women's

22 A Mennonite Church Eastern Canada grant allowed me to work full-time on worship resourcing for one year. I have otherwise worked on *Voices Together* and Together in Worship as a volunteer.

23 The website togetherinworship.net is a free collection of online resources from Anabaptist sources. The initial development of the website was funded by a Teacher-Scholar Vital Worship Grant from the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship.

work, this has a cyclical effect: high turnover, weak outcomes, and limited aspirations reinforce attitudes toward worship leadership as insignificant and unworthy of investment.[24]

The way in which worship leadership in Mennonite congregations has become women's work has far-reaching consequences. It results in a lack of support for women giving theological leadership in the church through developing worship resources and leading in worship. Since worship contributes to constructing our conceptions of gender, treating worship leadership as concealed and low status work renders women invisible and undervalued in our congregations. It also represents a failure to nurture the gifts of the entire congregation, including men. Furthermore, it devalues all aspects of worship that are not music and preaching, weakening the worship life of the church, and spiritually impoverishing our communities. All of this is a cycle that reinforces itself—and from which we must break free.

A call to action

It is crucial to emphasize that the problem is *not* that women are leading worship. The problem is that the prevalence of women in worship leadership has changed the perception of this role, leading to the devaluation of worship leadership. This is not because worship leadership is undemanding or unimportant work; it is both demanding and important. To lead worship well requires training, practice, and ability. However, like other professions, when worship leadership is seen as something just anyone can do—"even women"—we do not invest in it or in those who undertake this role. I wish to propose two concrete actions we can take as initial steps toward addressing this issue.

First, we can create space for people of all genders to be involved in all aspects of worship: worship planning and leading, developing worship resources, preaching, and leading singing. Specifically, pastors who identify as men can show leadership by investing their time and effort in worship leading as well as preaching. Instead of seeing women worship leaders as "balancing" predominantly male preaching and song leading, men can take the initiative to move toward gender balance in all roles.

Second, we can recognize, resource, and celebrate the work of worship leadership and the women and others who serve as worship leaders. We can make visible and honor the substantial work that worship leaders

24 Truss, Alfes, Shantz, and Rosewarne, "Still in the Ghetto?" 350–51.

do both in public and behind the scenes. We can prioritize providing meaningful feedback to worship leaders as well as preachers. We can offer financial compensation to worship leaders as well as musicians and preachers. We can invest in opportunities for growth and advancement of worship leaders, through creating strong supporting resources and options for continuing education. Summoned by God's vision of justice and equality and imagining a world where the worshipful work of all who are made in God's image is valued, we can live into a future where worship leadership as women's work is no longer a problem.

About the Author

Sarah Kathleen Johnson is a visiting assistant professor of theology and worship and Louisville Institute Postdoctoral Fellow at Vancouver School of Theology and St. Mark's College at the University of British Columbia. She was the worship resources editor for *Voices Together* and is the chair of the TogetherInWorship.net leadership team. Sarah holds a PhD in Theology from the University of Notre Dame and master's degrees with a focus on worship from Yale Divinity School and Conrad Grebel University College. She is originally from Waterloo, Ontario.