



Project 3:28: The campaign for gender justice



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Setting the scene

Christian conference season is almost upon us. Whether camping in a field or booking into a bed and breakfast and arriving on-site with clean hair and fresh clothing, thousands of Christians will spend various parts of the summer making their way to Shepton Mallet, Keswick or Kettering. The brightest and the best of the Christian conference speaking circuit will share witty anecdotes and wisdom with the gathered throng. Yet the brightest and the best seem to be predominately white men (and their wives).

Two years ago I became so interested in what has been described as the 'pale, stale, male' Christian platform situation, that in partnership with Christian blogger and activist, Helen Austin, I collated the amount of men and women on the national Christian platform. Gathering data from all the national events we were aware of, we spent a couple of evenings gathering and ordering the data.

What we found was that only 25 per cent of the overall Christian platform was female. Not only that but often women who spoke at events were married to men who were speaking at the events; sessions led by women often focussed on subjects perceived as 'women's issues', e.g. parenting, self-esteem, feelings, etc.

Some were surprised by the data. Others defended the situation, with some conference organisers commenting on the difficulty in finding competent female speakers. Pleas of 'political correctness gone mad' and 'we want the best speaker, it shouldn't matter if they are male' were made from various corners of the church.

Interestingly, although some of the events had a complementarian theology, believing that women shouldn't lead in certain roles, almost all events had some female speakers (or had done in the past) suggesting that the lack of women on the platform was not about theological conviction. Other events had a strong egalitarian approach, believing theologically that women can have any role, yet the gender of their speakers did not reflect women as equal to men.

Seeking gender parity

Helen and I began talking with other interested people about the situation; theologians Dr Paula Gooder and Dr Steve Homes, Wendy Beech Ward (who ran Spring Harvest for 15 years), Rachel Jordan (National Mission and Evangelism Advisor for the Church of England), Hannah Mudge (feminist blogger) and Vicky Walker (communications consultant). We began considering what it would take to create a gender balanced Christian platform. Out of these conversations was borne Project 3.28.

Project 3:28 found its name in Galatians 3.28: 'There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.' As Christians we live out a redeemed reality, our identity found in Christ, not in our gender, ethnicity or employment status. Yet, this side of eternity our lives are always going to be shaped by the intersection of oppression and privilege that each of us experience. The church is not immune from prejudice and discrimination. We may serve a God who said, 'You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials

exercise authority over them. Not so with you' (Mt 20.25–26). Yet the use of power within the church since its alliance with the Roman Empire has always been more reflective of the emperor than our risen Lord who saved humanity by giving up all power and dying for us.

The purpose of Project 3:28 is to challenge the UK church to do better on gender justice. It is almost guaranteed that Christian conferences will have a higher proportion of female attendees, yet most will have a much higher proportion of male speakers. God made us male and female, and unless we have both male and female on the platform we are not truly modeling the redeemed reality of Galatians 3.28.

Responding to criticisms of Project 3.28

Although there has been lots of support for improving the gender balance at Christian conferences, we've also had criticism. Some of the challenges to Project 3:28 include:

'We don't want to have a platform based on political correctness, we want the best speakers. End of.'

Unless you believe that men are better at public speaking than women, the 'best' is based on a system which unfairly disadvantages women. This is not about being politically correct, it's about hearing from a broader spectrum of the church, which can only be a positive thing.

'Quotas to get more female speakers are unfair, what if there are really good male speakers that get missed because of them?'

There have been lots of assumptions that quotas are the only approach to addressing an unbalanced platform. However, until we unpick the many and varied reasons why the imbalance exists, quotas will not address the core reasons why the Christian platform isn't equal. At present it's already unfair; there are really good female speakers who are being missed, and we need to address this. There are only so many conference slots and men will have to lose some of those if women are to be fairly represented.

'Christianity isn't about balance, it's about preaching the gospel. This issue isn't about the gospel.'

For many women (and men) it has been the Church's treatment of women that caused them to reject Jesus. For many feminists, their discovery of feminism led to their rejection of Christianity due to their experience of the church oppressing and silencing women. For those people, gender is a salvation issue. If the gospel isn't good news to women gifted with the ability to speak and preach, then it isn't really good news.

'Projects like this cost loads of money that could be better spent helping the poor.'

Project 3:28 has received no funding and I run the project as a volunteer.

What are we doing?

A year after producing the first statistics, we produced a second set which built on data from the first set of statistics. We have seen a 9 per cent increase across the UK Christian platform, with women accounting for 34 per cent of the platform in 2014.

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We have seen a level of commitment from some conference organisers to create a more balanced platform, Soul Survivor have implemented a short talk programme for first-time speakers and the Holy Trinity Brompton Leadership Conference had a marked increase in women speaking on the main stage in both 2014 and 2015.

Other conferences have been less forthcoming, though increases were seen between 2013 and 2014 in some conferences, though from the data it suggests this may have been incidental rather than intentional.

We have produced an in-depth paper, which uses a socio-ecological model to examine the many barriers women face in having equal access to the Christian platform. By articulating the many barriers, we can create an action plan for changing the situation.

We are in the early stages of developing an online database of female speakers. By creating a comprehensive, fully searchable resource for conference organisers, we hope to make it easier for them to access speakers. We need quite a lot of funding to make this happen and are considering crowdfunding the project.

What can you do as church leader?

There is much that you can do! Women and girls need opportunities and role models. Can you be intentional about encouraging women into teaching/speaking positions? Do you offer leadership training for those who might be interested? Do you consider the particular barriers women may be facing in pursuing a leadership call?

In your children's work do you use resources that only show men and boys from within the Bible and across church history, or are you also explicit about the women and girls who were leaders? In my Anglican church, a nine-year-old girl made the offhanded comment, 'But only boys can be vicars can't they?' We have had female vicars for over 20 years, but as the vicar and curates in our church are male, this child didn't know. How can you make visible women leaders, not just to the children but to the adults in the church too?

How can you challenge sexism and prejudice in your church? It's not only about women taking on leadership roles, but also about men taking on support roles. Do men make the tea, run the crèche, do the administration? If women are always busy doing the work to support the church in continuing they don't have

the time, or any role models, to show that they are as called to preach and lead in the church.

What are the biggest barriers to women having equal representation on the platform?

Lack of experience

Motherhood and being a wife can cause women to be unable to gain appropriate experience speaking publicly. Often for most Christian couples there is an assumption that the husband's career and prospects are of a higher priority. Once children are born this can be reinforced. There are often large gaps in women's experience and expertise due to life circumstances.

Demand from conference attendees

Alongside hoping to equip and support Christians, conferences are seeking to make money through running events. If enough Christians refused to attend events unless they were gender balanced, this would encourage conference organisers that this is a priority to their customers and action would be taken. While we continue to participate in unbalanced events, they will continue to be unbalanced.

Egalitarian in theory

A lot of individuals and organisations are egalitarian in theory. They believe that biblically men and women are equal, but take little action to ensure women are given equal opportunities with men. We need to see individuals and organisations become egalitarian in practice, living out practical ways of encouraging women and ensuring there are equal opportunities.

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Wives

At some Christian events, the majority of women given speaking opportunities are married to male speakers at the event. This can create the perception that women have to 'marry in' to gain an invitation to speak.

Tempresses

Women can be viewed with suspicion by male leaders and the fear of inappropriate or sexual contact taking place can leave male leaders reluctant to mentor or support women with a leadership calling.

Gender socialisation and neurosexism

Women are often socialised to be less confident. Girls are placed in quite restrictive clothing and encouraged to play with contained toys like Sylvanians or Barbies. Boys are often encouraged to be more outgoing and terms like 'bossy' or 'stropky' are rarely used to describe boys. Alongside this, neurosexism can leave people assuming that it is differences between men and women's brains that cause men and women to behave differently and be gifted differently.

Aggressive/leadership gifting

Often when a woman has a leadership gifting in can be perceived as being aggressive due to societal constructs of femininity. Women who speak their mind or have an opinion can gain a reputation for being 'scary' whereas when men exhibit these behaviours it's seen as a positive trait for leadership.

Rejecting all-male platforms

While male Christians leaders accept the status quo, things are unlikely to change. Conference organisers need to know that male Christian leaders will turn down speaking slots if there aren't enough women on the platform. Until egalitarian male leaders begin acting out the courage of their convictions, and prioritise a more balanced platform above their own opportunities, change is going to continue to be very slow.

Patriarchy

In Genesis 3.16 we discover that male domination is one of the primary consequences of the Fall, 'Your desire will be for your husband and he will rule over you.' Since the Fall we have seen throughout the Bible and across history that women are oppressed by men. Domestic violence, female genital mutilation, female infanticide, pornographies, rape and sexual harassment are a reality for thousands of women. This oppression of women is found in the murder and rape of women and the disadvantage women face in every society in the world. Though we live out a redeemed reality, where the curse of sin and death is broken in Jesus, we also live out a reality in which death and sin still affect us day in and day out.

Patriarchy is a principality and power and we must be praying against it and recognise the all-pervasive way that it affects our lives. Whether on the Christian platform or in the home, in our communities or through our churches, women-as-a-class are disadvantaged and we must do all we can to pray and act in ways which undermine the powers which seek to keep women oppressed. Because until the people who birth the nations are free, nobody is free.

If you would like to know more about Project 3:28 and get involved with the campaign, you can find further details on their website, www.project328.info