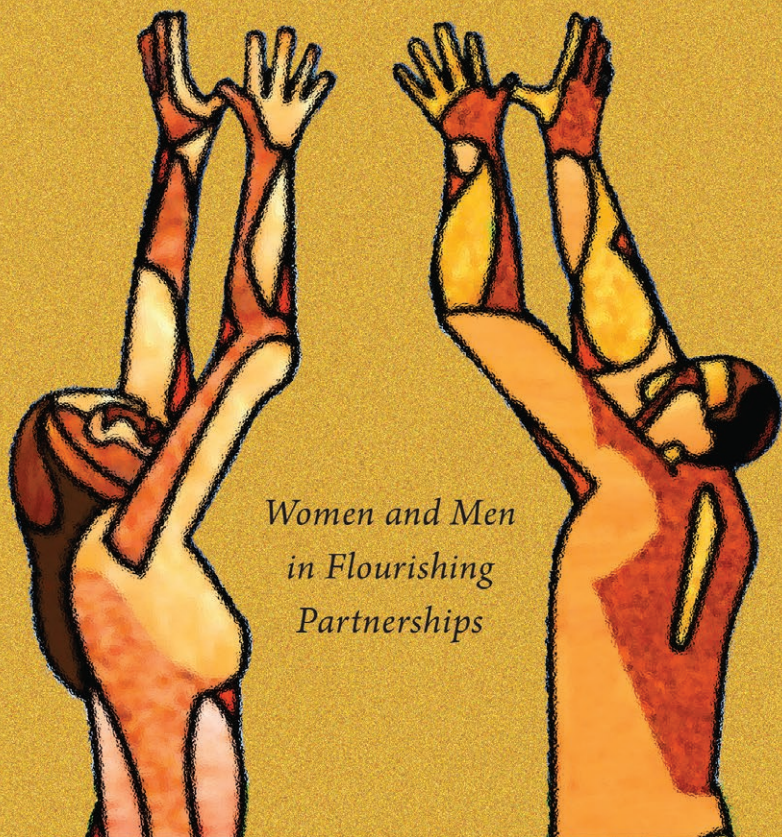


Together in
MINISTRY



*Women and Men
in Flourishing
Partnerships*

ROB DIXON

Foreword by RUTH HALEY BARTON



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THE TOGETHER IN MINISTRY MODEL

THE FIRST AIM OF MY DOCTORAL RESEARCH was to determine the best combination of attributes that constitute flourishing mixed-gender ministry partnerships. Following that determination, my goal was to assemble those attributes into a model that individuals and communities could use to build such partnerships in greater measure. Before laying out the Together in Ministry model, some introductory definitions and background regarding the notion of *flourishing mixed-gender ministry partnerships* are in order.

MINISTRY PARTNERSHIPS

To begin with, my focus is the particular context of Christian *ministry*. *Ministry* includes any activity where the good news about Jesus is being proclaimed, either in word or deed. In my case, my research was conducted among individuals on staff with InterVarsity Christian Fellowship/USA. InterVarsity is a seventy-five-year-old evangelical campus ministry based in the United States whose stated purpose is “to establish and advance at colleges and universities witnessing communities of students and faculty who follow Jesus as Savior and Lord: growing in love for God, God’s word, God’s people of every ethnicity and culture, and God’s purposes in the world.” In InterVarsity’s ministry, women and men partner together every day, in a variety of configurations.

My study began with InterVarsity, but since then I have noticed that my findings have relevance and applicability in other ministry contexts as well. As I have presented this content to a wide range of churches and organizations, including Wycliffe, Cru, Missio Nexus, and the Reformed Church in America, I have seen people helped by what I have discovered. It has been gratifying to watch the Together in Ministry model helpfully transcend organizational boundaries and denominational distinctives into a wide range of ministry contexts.

Next, in my research interviews and focus groups, I investigated many different forms of ministry *partnerships*. In some cases, partnerships were marked by an organizational power dynamic, with one of the partners serving as a supervisor to the other. In other cases, partners were peers, operating either as long-standing coworkers or in short-term arrangements. Some partners worked closely together and others over distance. This research is informed by a diversity of partnership arrangements, thus increasing its relevance to a variety of organizational contexts.

MIXED-GENDER

Next, by the term *mixed-gender*, I am specifically referring to ministry partnerships between women and men. The conversation around gender is alive right now in many spaces—including within some Christian churches and organizations—but during my research process, I opted to confine myself solely to ministry partnerships between women and men, and therefore *Together in Ministry* will be similarly restrained.¹ I will not, then, have anything specific to say about gender fluidity, transgenderism, or LGBTQ+ issues, though these topics are certainly worthy of further study.²

Instead, I have been curious about what makes ministry partnerships specifically between women and men work well, and *Together in Ministry* represents my answer to that question. No doubt each reader can bring to mind someone from the opposite gender with whom they work or serve in some sort of ministry context. In fact, it will be useful for readers to read this book with this person, or these people, in view. Better still, mixed-gender ministry partners can read this book together! In *Together in Ministry*, I aspire to equip individuals and communities to steward these partnerships well.

FLOURISHING

Finally, in *Together in Ministry* I will join with a growing chorus of writers and thinkers in using the term *flourishing* to capture the essence of what I hope these mixed-gender partnerships can become. The concept of flourishing is a popular

¹When I began my research study in 2014, I used the term *inter-gender partnerships in mission*, but I realized that I would need further clarity going forward. By the time I was preparing my dissertation in the summer of 2017, I was using the term *male/female ministry partnerships*. More recently, I've landed on the more streamlined *mixed-gender ministry partnerships*.

²Likewise, *Together in Ministry* will stop short of a full-blown discussion about how social factors such as race and class intersect with gender in someone's lived experience. While reflection on the intersection of various factors deserves a full treatment, it is beyond the scope of my research process.

one in many Christian circles. For instance, in his book *Strong and Weak*, Andy Crouch defines flourishing as being “fully alive.”³ When something is fully alive, it is functioning as it was meant to function. Everything is working as intended, whether we’re talking about a person, a relationship, or a system.

The Hebrew notion of shalom offers a biblical analog to how Crouch, myself, and others are using the term *flourishing*. When someone or something is experiencing shalom, it is truly flourishing and fully alive. In her book *The Very Good Gospel*, Lisa Sharon Harper captures the holistic nature of shalom:

Shalom is what the Kingdom of God smells like. It’s what the Kingdom looks like and what Jesus requires of the Kingdom’s citizens. It’s when everyone has enough. It’s when families are healed. It’s when shame is renounced and inner freedom is laid hold of. It’s when human dignity, bestowed by the image of God in all humanity, is cultivated, protected, and served in families, faith communities, and schools and through public policy. Shalom is when the capacity to lead is recognized in every human being and when nations join together to protect the environment.⁴

What a vivid and compelling picture of shalom and, by extension, of human flourishing.

In the context of my research, mixed-gender ministry partnerships are flourishing when two things are true. First, ministry partners experience a profound sense of personal satisfaction. That is, the partnership is a blessing to each person involved. It is enjoyable, enriching, and life giving. More often than not, both partners go home at the end of the day grateful to be in partnership together.

Second, flourishing mixed-gender ministry partnerships accomplish something. They are not just personally satisfying; they are also missionally effective. In other words, the work produced is better specifically because of the partnership. Plenty of studies attest to the positive impact of diversity on an organization’s bottom line, and flourishing partnerships experience that on a regular basis.⁵

³Andy Crouch, *Strong and Weak: Embracing a Life of Love, Risk and True Flourishing* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016), 11.

⁴Lisa Sharon Harper, *The Very Good Gospel: How Everything Wrong Can Be Made Right* (New York: WaterBrook, 2016), 14.

⁵For more on this idea, see chap. 6, which engages the correlation between gender diversity and ministry growth and development.

These two characteristics—personal satisfaction and missional effectiveness—define what flourishing can look like in mixed-gender ministry partnerships.⁶ When either of these two characteristics are absent or underdeveloped, partnerships won't be fully alive.



Figure 1.1. Personal satisfaction and missional effectiveness

Figure 1.1 further fills out this idea, using four quadrants to describe what happens as these two dimensions of flourishing increase or decrease. In quadrant one, both personal satisfaction and missional effectiveness are low, and one wonders why the partnership exists at all. After all, no one wants to be a part of a ministry partnership that is relationally dissatisfying and produces little fruit.

Quadrants two and three are better but still incomplete. In quadrant two, partnerships marked by high personal satisfaction but low missional effectiveness make for solid mixed-gender friendships, which are no small thing. As will be noted in chapter seven, life-giving mixed-gender friendships are important. Still, the lack of missional fruit limits such a partnership from being all that it could be in the ministry context.

⁶I am borrowing these two axes of flourishing mixed-gender ministry partnerships from Carol Becker's talismanic work *Becoming Colleagues: Women and Men Serving Together in Faith* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2000): "Mixed-gender teams in which all the members say that their work is effective and mutually satisfying are the exception rather than the norm" (9).

In quadrant three, where missional effectiveness is high but personal satisfaction is low, lots of things get done but without accompanying personal fulfillment. As with the quadrant two example above, mixed-gender partnerships that expand the mission are still significant. And yet most work relationships marked by this reality will wear down over time. Even productive partnerships can wither without a robust interpersonal foundation.

Quadrant four, then, is the place of true flourishing, the quadrant where mixed-gender partnerships can be fully alive. It is the place of shalom. In quadrant four, personal satisfaction and missional effectiveness come together in a beautiful picture of flourishing mixed-gender ministry partnership.

As will become apparent throughout this book, I have been fortunate to personally experience the reality of flourishing mixed-gender partnerships. I know what quadrant four is like! For many years, I worked together in ministry with my friend Tina. Partnering together with Tina in ministry has been an interpersonal joy for us. Such is the nature of our friendship and working partnership that over the years we have regularly sought out opportunities to work together. On top of that, our partnership extends past the lines of work, as Tina is our family's official photographer, Tina's father served as our realtor, we trained for and ran a marathon together, and I officiated at Tina's wedding to her husband, Adam. In my ministry partnership with Tina, it has been a joy to experience a high degree of personal satisfaction.

At the same time, working together with Tina has repeatedly produced fruitful and effective ministry. Perhaps the best example of that is a seminar we lead that invites college students to explore the Bible's message of gender equality (see chap. 3). Our partnership is a true gift for our students in at least three ways. First, since Tina and I see the world through our distinctive lenses, the students benefit from our diverse perspectives. Second, serving in partnership permits students to choose to engage with the leader they connect with better, thus increasing our accessibility. Finally, our effective collaborating provides a real-time model that illustrates the very content we are studying.

By God's grace, my ministry partnership with Tina demonstrates the twin axes of flourishing mixed-gender ministry partnerships: personal satisfaction and ministry effectiveness. Next, I will provide an overview for how individuals and communities can build such partnerships in greater measure.

TEN ATTRIBUTES OF FLOURISHING MIXED-GENDER MINISTRY PARTNERSHIPS

During the course of my research, I engaged a diverse sample of more than sixty campus ministers working or formerly working with InterVarsity Christian Fellowship. Using the qualitative research methodologies of semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and participant observation, I sought answers to my primary research question: What collection of attributes compose flourishing mixed-gender ministry partnerships for my research participants?

After approximately two years of research, I gathered and coded the data, looking for common themes. Eventually, ten attributes emerged as critical for flourishing mixed-gender ministry partnerships. In other words, these ten characteristics constitute the raw material from which personally satisfying and missionally effective mixed-gender partnerships are formed. This book will devote a chapter to each attribute, but I will mention them in brief here.

First, mixed-gender ministry partnerships flourish when both members are committed to maintaining an authentic learner's posture. When people are eager and able to walk in one another's shoes, trust is formed and partnerships are more likely to flourish.

Second, a shared theological conviction that God honors the full and equal partnership of women and men marks flourishing partnerships. Ministry partners must be on the same page that full and equal partnerships between women and men are a biblically sanctioned way to accomplish God's kingdom purposes.

Third, when a person has a deepening awareness of their personal gender brokenness, they will be more equipped to form flourishing partnerships. Gender brokenness can take many forms, but when a person is aware of their shortcomings, they are able to take proactive steps to engage in mixed-gender ministry partnerships with greater wholeness.

Fourth, flourishing partnerships embody a vision for freely shared power. When partners are able to embrace and live out a countercultural model of shared power, there is more likely to be flourishing. Included in this attribute are concepts such as mutual advocacy, voluntary submission, and the paradigm that all voices are welcomed around the table.

Fifth, flourishing mixed-gender ministry partnerships are marked by a belief that embracing difference advances the mission. Whether or not

differences adhere to the stereotypical picture of gender differences, in flourishing mixed-gender ministry partnerships people are free to lead in ways that are authentic to them. When differences are acknowledged and affirmed, they can be leveraged to advance the mission, often with exponential effects.

Sixth, flourishing mixed-gender ministry partnerships are simultaneously thriving friendships. Trust is formed as ministry partners share their whole lives with one another. While this attribute can be tricky, in part because it can challenge our notions of work/life balance, women and men are more likely to build flourishing partnerships when they are able to find a way to become both colleagues and friends.

Seventh, when teams and communities are able to cultivate a corporate sensitivity to adverse gender dynamics, flourishing partnerships can thrive. The social and organizational playing fields too often tilt in favor of men, and when communities have a radar for the subtle things that perpetuate that bias, they become able to mitigate those dynamics and mixed-gender ministry partnerships are empowered to flourish.

Eighth, abundant communication is central for flourishing partnerships. Consistent and vulnerable communication should saturate a partnership from beginning to end, including setting up the partnership, resolving conflict, and frequent debriefing. Simply put, if mixed-gender ministry partners cannot communicate effectively, their partnership will struggle to flourish.

Ninth, flourishing mixed-gender ministry partnerships are defined by contextualized interpersonal boundaries, tailored for each particular ministry partnership. Once they are clear on these contextualized boundaries, women and men can live out their partnerships with integrity and accountability.

Finally, flourishing mixed-gender ministry partnerships are more likely to become a reality when there is a public dimension to them. Indeed, when people see models of flourishing partnerships around them, they are inspired to create them themselves. In addition, verbally reinforcing the value is critical, as is intentionally pursuing diverse representation in a variety of ministry contexts.

Taken together, these ten attributes serve as the clay out of which flourishing mixed-gender ministry partnerships are formed. As individuals and communities pursue these attributes, my research shows that they will experience a higher degree of both personal satisfaction and missional effectiveness.

THREE DOMAINS OF FLOURISHING

After establishing this tenfold roster of attributes, my next task was to form them into a viable training model. I began this process by grouping the ten attributes into three larger domains.



Figure 1.2. The inner life domain



Figure 1.3. The community culture domain

Because we bring who we are into the ministry partnerships we establish, the inner life domain captures who someone is or is in the process of becoming. This domain encompasses the attributes of an authentic learner's posture, a shared theological conviction of gender equality, and an awareness of gender brokenness (see fig. 1.2).

Next, the community culture in which a mixed-gender ministry partnership is situated will be critical in determining whether or not that partnership will be allowed to flourish. If the community or organizational culture endorses mixed-gender ministry partnerships, they have a greater possibility of flourishing. Unfortunately, the converse is also true. Attributes that populate the community culture domain include a vision for freely shared power, differences for the sake of mission, a value for holistic friendships, and a corporate sensitivity to adverse gender dynamics (see fig. 1.3).

Third, the intentional practices domain encompasses three tangible things that people and communities do in order to form flourishing mixed-gender ministry partnerships. Specifically, the attributes of abundant communication, contextualized boundaries, and public affirmation and modeling make up the intentional practices domain (see fig. 1.4).



Figure 1.4. The intentional practices domain

THE TOGETHER IN MINISTRY MODEL

After articulating the roster of ten attributes and grouping them into three larger domains, I determined that the best way to express the interconnectedness between the various elements was to use a Venn diagram. This enabled me to express two core principles regarding the model.

First, the middle of the diagram, where all three domains converge, is the sweet spot or target. This is the

quadrant-four place of flourishing, where mixed-gender ministry partnerships are formed that are simultaneously personally satisfying and missionally effective. From my research, it became clear that each of the ten attributes contribute to flourishing partnerships, and the Venn diagram allowed me to represent that in a visual way.⁷

Second, the Venn diagram allowed me to imagine what would happen if one of the three domains is absent or significantly underdeveloped. For instance, if the inner life domain is removed, individuals and communities are left with a culture that endorses flourishing mixed-gender ministry partnerships, and people have been equipped to form them, but there is little conviction behind the effort. Over time, this can be a recipe for disillusionment, and the project will wither.

Next, if the community culture domain is removed, people are both committed to forming flourishing mixed-gender partnerships and trained to make them happen, but the culture is not open to people expressing their convictions. It can be confusing and dissatisfying to repeatedly run into a wall, and that is what removing the community culture domain can feel like.

Lastly, removing the intentional practices domain would result in people who have a conviction about forming flourishing mixed-gender ministry

⁷One way that the interconnectedness of the model's attributes gets expressed in this book is through repeated cross-referencing. Often the reader will be directed to other chapters for related information.

partnerships situated in a culture that invites healthy activity, but no one knows how to capably form such partnerships. This lack of skills could end up resulting in a lot of talk with no accompanying action.

In the end, the Together in Ministry model looks like figure 1.5.

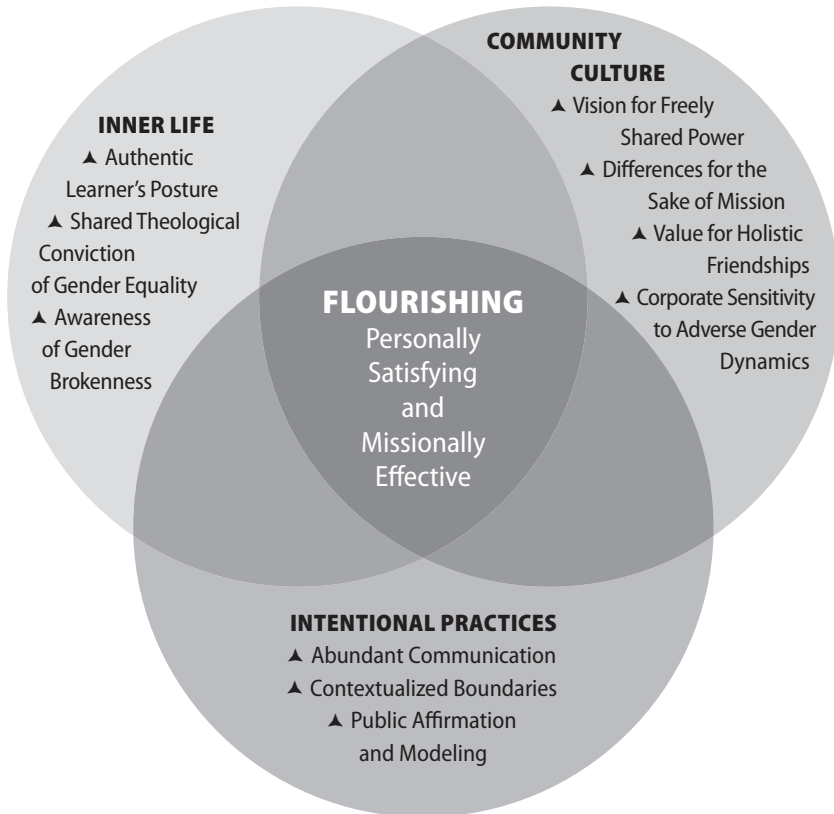


Figure 1.5. Together in Ministry model of flourishing mixed-gender ministry partnerships

FINAL THOUGHTS

Flourishing mixed-gender ministry partnerships will not happen by accident. On the contrary, they will take focused effort and courageous intentionality. Thankfully, the Together in Ministry model, with its ten attributes grouped into three domains, can help individuals and communities form flourishing mixed-gender ministry partnerships in greater measure.

PROCESSING QUESTIONS

1. Think of some of the mixed-gender ministry partnerships you have in your life. Which of the four quadrants would you put them in?
2. When have you experienced flourishing in the context of a mixed-gender ministry partnership? What specifically made it personally satisfying and missionally effective?
3. Go back through the brief introduction to the ten attributes. Give yourself a letter grade for each of the attributes. Which seem like strengths for you and the partnerships you are in? Which clearly need work?
4. As you sit with this overview of the Together in Ministry model, what questions do you have before you engage with each of the attributes in more detail?

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