

Educating Others on the Power of Women in Leadership Positions in the Church

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Abstract

As educators, it is important to continue to educate others on the importance of including the voice of women in top leadership positions. Women face many barriers to employment in general. This paper seeks to provide recommendations and suggestions that may assist leadership to openly address the immediate needs of women. The purpose of this paper is three fold: 1) present a review of the information that focuses on the importance of including women in top leadership opportunities; 2) include a review of helpful strategies to assist women in remaining and striving for promotions in the church, especially the African Methodist Episcopal Church; and 3) provide helpful future directions and considerations on the topic. This paper seeks to shed a positive light and dialogue.

Keywords: Church, Leadership, Women

Introduction

Women are not well represented in top key positions in certain Black Churches. As educators, it is important to continue to educate others on the importance of including the voice of women in leadership positions. This paper reviews some available literature on the topic. Women face many barriers to employment in general. The purpose of this paper is three fold: 1) present a review of the information that focuses on the importance of including women in top leadership opportunities; 2) include a review of helpful strategies to assist women in remaining and striving for promotions in the church, especially the African Methodist Episcopal Church (A.M.E.); and 3) provide helpful future directions and considerations on the topic. This paper seeks to shed a positive light on ways that educators can dialogue to create an atmosphere to communicate strategies to encourage more collaborative efforts to include women more often in the top leadership positions. By noting the importance of this effort in this conceptual effort, the author hopes that educators will aim to spread the awareness through the word in conceptual and empirically based ways at conferences, seminars, workshops, and international symposia globally.

Vital Questions

Why are women not given the accolades deserved in top leadership roles? That is the question of the hour. Furthermore, the role of women, as leaders in the church is equally important. Are measures developed that assist women as leaders in being and remaining successful in top leadership positions? To provide women with the proper professional development opportunities, organizations must view women as diverse, unique, and equally as important as men in positions in leadership.

Diversity/Women Leaders

The diversity that women bring to an environment is a rare gem. The diverse differences that women bring should be celebrated. Yet, women, at times, are not included or are at times devalued. There is a need for further exploration into the barriers women experience in work environments or positions. In addition to the discussions to explore these challenges women face, more exploration should go into how to enhance better environments. There are certain questions that can be asked about women. For instance, why are women not being recruited more into certain top leadership positions? Is there enough literature that explores how to stop this miscarriage of justice? Why are organizations not doing more inclusive efforts? These questions are important to explore related to women.

According to Warner, Ellman, and Boesch (2017)

Women are 50.8 percent of the U.S. population. They earn almost 60 percent of undergraduate degrees and 60 percent of all master's degrees. They earn 47 percent of all law degrees and 48 percent of all medical degrees. They earn 38 percent of MBAs and 48 percent of specialized master's degrees. They account for 47 percent of the U.S. labor force and 49 percent of the college-educated workforce (para. 1).

In a search for information related to this topic, certain women's names tend to come up in the literature searches such as Jarena Lee and Bishop Vashti. These names are great names in the history of the A.M.E. Of course, there are many great women in the history of the A.M.E. as the list is infinite. According to Abernethy (2018), women are not represented in key leadership positions even though women have gained some strides of the church to include them. However, since 2000, women have not seen efforts or enough dialogue aimed at increasing the number of women in top positions like Bishop. Abernethy (2018) noted:

In African American churches, women's leadership includes all areas of responsibility—from the more traditional roles as leaders of women in missionary societies and women's groups, to congregational leaders in areas such as Christian education and pastoral ministry. My reflection on women's leadership in African American churches will include a brief overview of women's leadership, potential impediments to women's leadership, approaches to addressing these obstacles, some of the contributions of African American women, and signs of hope and encouragement. While African American women represent an estimated 66–88 percent majority (Barnes, 2006) in African American churches, men still tend to hold most of the leadership roles. The greatest disparity in women's leadership is in the pastoral role, specifically the senior pastor. Despite these challenges, women are being ordained and appointed as pastors and bishops at increasing rates. The appointment of Bishop Vashti Murphy McKenzie in 2000 as the first woman bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church was an important step toward gender inclusivity. (para 1-2)

With the scant information available on women and their roles in the African Methodist Episcopal Church from 2000 to 2019, it was a surprising to learn that the women currently are still going through the same exclusion issues as women in the 1800's and 1900's in the church. Historical wrongdoings toward women such as racism, sexism, and unequal pay would seem to change the feelings towards women in leadership in the Church. However, despite the many challenges, positive successes of women in leadership positions, and the changes over decades, there appears to continue a cycle of historical non-inclusive efforts repeating themselves in reference to the treatment of women in leadership (e.g., low pay/unequal pay, smaller churches with low or almost no members, racism, sexism, among others).

Based on a review of the literature, there was one article that provided some interesting findings on the presence of women in some of the denominations. The denominations that participated are the only ones listed: currently, the American Baptist Churches USA and Evangelical Lutheran Church in America are the only groups in the analysis with women in their top leadership positions. Susan Gillies is interim general secretary of the Baptist churches and Elizabeth Eaton is the presiding bishop of the Lutheran group. The Episcopal Church had a woman, Katharine Jefferts Schori, serving as presiding bishop from 2006 to 2015. In the United Methodist Church, another woman, Rosemarie Wenner, served two terms as president of the council of bishops, an international body charged with providing spiritual leadership to Methodists around the world (The church does not have its own governing body in the U.S.; Wenner, who is German, is based in Europe). The Unitarian Universalist Association has had women running in the past three elections for president, but, so far, no woman has won. This year, there are candidates. The Union for Reform Judaism, the central leadership arm of Reform Jewish congregations in the U.S., has never had a woman president. However, a woman, Denise Eger, serves as president of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, the principal organization for Reform rabbis in the U.S. Additionally, another woman, Daryl Messinger, is the chair of the North American board of trustees, which is the top lay leadership post in the organization. Many churches, including many of the largest denominations in the United States, such as the Roman Catholic Church, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) and the Southern Baptist Convention, do not allow women to be ordained or hold top church leadership positions (Sandstrom, 2016).

Though the A.M.E. Church was not on the list in the above article, one may surmise that women in the A.M.E. denomination have similar situations. From the author's general observations with traveling to out of state and in state churches in certain geographical areas, the women most likely are not as represented as much in top leadership positions (i.e., positions like Bishop or similar high positions). In personal observations and reviewing some articles on this topic, the A.M.E. does have credentials and qualifications for women to become Evangelists, Itinerant Deacons, Presiding Elders (Belin, 2016) more than the top leadership positions such as Bishop and others. Over the last decade, through personal observations, there seems to be an increasing number of women represented as Elders in the A.M.E. church. In an attempt to locate any data on this area, the author could not find any research available as of this date.

Background Information

In the literature on women and leadership, there is a plethora of information on women and their role in corporations and entrepreneurship. In the area of women and leadership in the A.M.E Church, it is scant or the information lists certain women and their individual accomplishments. Considering scant information available on women in top leadership positions in the AME church, this section of the paper is dedicated to certain strategies that the A.M.E. Church may utilize to increase the number of women in top leadership positions in the church. These strategies are based on the literature as innovative ways to support their growth. The strategies presented in this paper are mentoring, sessions or focused meetings to educate, empower, and to train others to work to promote women to top leadership positions, and focus on the accomplishments of women that deserve the promotion to top positions.

Strategies for Including More Women

Focused Dialogue

The A.M.E. Church can host seminars, conferences, and General Conference meetings related to women's issues and being recruited and retained in top leadership positions. This type of focused efforts calling attention of women and challenges in leadership would open a dialogue that would include the voices of women and men who are passionate on this topic. Influential female leaders can serve as main presenters at these meetings. In addition, the voices of women in the lay and in other leadership positions can be included. Some of these meeting topics can relate to the glass ceiling, mentorship of women, and positive ways to enhance the representation of women in key positions. Additionally, educators can employ names of educators across the state, internationally, and regionally, who can be major discussants at these targeted meetings. The Bishops of the A.M.E. can note these meetings as intentional meetings that focus on trainings to stop some of the injustices that have occurred historically. Moreover, the meetings can be held around significant months related to Women's Day, Founder's Day, and Civil Rights. Many educational training topics can stem from this concept. The A.M.E. has several theological seminaries. These institutions of higher learning can be chosen as beacons of education to host the conferences for the training to educate others on the women empowerment sessions.

Focused Meetings on the Glass Ceiling

The glass ceiling is defined as an invisible upper limit in corporations and other organizations, above which it is difficult or impossible for women to rise in the ranks. "Glass ceiling" is a metaphor for the hard-to-see informal barriers that keep women from getting promotions, pay raises, and further opportunities. The "glass ceiling" metaphor has also been used to describe the limits and barriers experienced by minority racial groups. It is "glass" because it's not usually a visible barrier, and a woman may not be aware of its existence until she "hits" the barrier. In other words, it's not an explicit practice of discriminating against women — though specific policies, practices, and attitudes may exist that produce this barrier without the intention to discriminate” (Lewis, 2019, para 1-2).

There are many conferences that focus on diversity, inclusion, and barriers in promotions. In reviewing the topics at these conferences, few conference agenda booklets have topics that deal with the challenges of women in denominations and the lack of promotion of these women in top leadership positions. The A.M.E. leadership team may need to employ more intentional efforts to discuss this in detail. For example, to discuss the glass ceiling and how this can affect the women in the A.M.E, there are certain articles that can be noted.

Johns (2019) stated that the glass ceiling is a term from the 1980's in which the government noted that there were many barriers to employment faced by women that were not always observable or easily seen. Therefore, in 1991, the Congress instituted a Glass Ceiling Commission that would examine the plight of women in employment situations and start a dialogue to promote change on behalf of women leaders (Johns).

Focused Meetings on Inclusion

Amberbazi (2019) stated that inclusion “refers to a cultural and environmental feeling of belonging and your voice be heard” (para. 1). It is an alarming feeling when a person is a part of an organization but may feel isolated or not included. For the consummate professional

experiencing exclusion from others, what is the best course of action? For some, coming across the positive way is the best solution when in management or other positions. It is sometimes hard to prove that one is being treated differently when in a position. If the person cannot show evidence of the incidents of being treated differently, it can prove to be a stressful period in employment.

Focused Meetings on Women in Leadership Positions/A.M.E.

Focused meetings that discuss the impact of women leadership in the church are essential. The major female leaders in the A.M.E. are essential to bring in as keynote presenters. In these meetings, there should be a dialogue presented that notes the historical roles of women in the church and how now it is vital that the roles of women in top leadership positions in denominations is a must. With these presenters and smaller breakout sessions, there could be a white paper developed that can then be presented to the General Conference of the A.M.E and other annual, district, and statewide meetings of the church.

Mentoring

Mentoring is defined as a person serving in a role with another person as a guide or a sponsor through certain professional development goals. For women who plan promotion in the A.M.E. Church, the best mentor is one who is affiliated with the organizational culture. First and foremost, it is hoped that the mentor is an avid person truly interested in diversifying the culture in the top leadership positions in the A.M.E. by choosing to include women. According to Hawkins (2019)

As with any relationship, mentoring takes two. A fruitful mentoring relationship does not exist solely because of either party's participation; it requires both. That is, mentors typically set the tone of the relationship by making the first move to invite the mentee out to lunch, for drinks, or to a networking event. Through opportunities for the mentee to be involved in the mentor's career, the mentee can engage in the mentor's story and learn from the mentor's wisdom. At the same time, the mentee has a responsibility to engage the mentor by following up to keep the momentum going. So many miss out on great mentoring relationships by failing to email a mentor or potential mentor after first meeting and receiving a mentor's business card. Or, on many occasions, the mentee does not keep the mentor in the loop when it comes to sharing successes, awards, honors, new jobs, or professional achievements. It does not take much to send an email with a link to an article that you just published or something that you think might be of interest to your mentor. These simple moments turn into opportunities to check in with one another and further develop your relationship. Both parties involved must put in the work and remain committed to the process, but as the mentee seeking advice and help from a mentor, you should make sure to do your part. (p. 1)

The information on mentoring is plentiful. The mentoring articles from 1980- current day are dedicated to examining the professional development aspects of mentoring that are significant to promote or advance people in certain positions or to achieve accomplishments. There are some interesting dissertations on mentoring and the positive outcomes associated with mentoring as well.

The mentoring literature provided some insight into the benefits of mentorship. Decker (2019) noted that

Mentorship is a critical component of success. According to the Stanford's Graduate School of Business, 80% of CEOs have had a mentor. The Small Business Administration cites 70% of businesses that have been mentored stay in business for over 5 years. The reasons are many. Mentors provide insight and knowledge not found in books; they have often walked the same path as their mentees. Most importantly they open networks which lead to opportunities that would not be available without their influence. A mentor makes a difference. The problem for women is often people select mentees who remind them of their younger selves. If men make up the ranks of leadership, they are mentoring other men. This must change if we want more women leaders (para. 1).

Joining Other Networks and Organizations

It is essential for any woman interested in being promoted in any organization to understand the politics and culture of the organization. With this understanding, the person must understand the written and unwritten rules. Women should understand that there are times that being popular will not be the best technique if there is a need to stand up for certain issues and misdoings in an organization. Therefore, attending other organizations, conferences and global meetings that promote change is essential.

Future Directions

Based on the research and observations, women, by far, can serve as top leaders in the A.M.E. church. Women need to prepare for a church, organization, and denomination that may not be ready for women to serve in high numbers in certain top positions. It creates an atmosphere of uncertainty when women are not well represented or not allowed to serve in certain positions (Cook & Glass, 2014). The glass ceiling may be a way to explain why the number of women in top leadership positions is scarce in the A.M.E. There may be other reasons for a low number represented but without enough empirical and qualitative research being conducted, the reasons cannot be explored. Consequently, until more empirical and qualitative studies are conducted to examine this challenge closely, there may be more decades of seeing the same occurrence, only one or two women in the top positions in the A.M.E. The studies that are mixed approach studies will serve to reveal more reasons and answers to questions.

Conclusion

In conclusion, women are valuable and deserve more attention in the leadership area. This paper reviewed some research available on the topic and identified certain strategies that can yield more information about women and leadership opportunities. From an overall analysis of the research, master's thesis, dissertations, and general books and articles on women in the A.M.E., this area needs more exploration. The strategies noted were more opportunities to host focused meetings that provide a dialogue for women voices to be heard. Mentoring, focused meetings, symposia, workshops, seminars, are noted as strategies to enhance women's professional development opportunities. Future research should be intentional and inclusive as well include a dialogue that addresses the needs and barriers that women face along the long journey to climbing the ladder to top leadership positions in the A.M.E. Despite the major accomplishments women have made over the last 50 years, there are still many more hurdles to endure before women are represented at the same numbers as men in the top leadership positions in the A.M.E. Positions of Bishop, Presiding Elder and the like are closer than farther away. Like the women before us, "we too shall overcome and one day see our sisters represented in more

numbers at the mountaintop of the Bishophood. Keep climbing my Sisters and I will keep writing.”

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