

Issues of Leadership Development for Women in their Thirties

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For women in Christian ministry, there are a myriad of difficult issues to be navigated even under the best of circumstances. Theological conflicts over the Biblical basis for women in leadership alone are enough for many women to want to call it quits. Our society has only more recently shifted towards a more equitable perspective about the genders in terms of abilities and worth; much of that shift has yet to occur within the church. In addition, vague notions of “family values” and the woman’s place being in the home abound and can get intertwined with the theological tensions over women in leadership, making it no easy task for women to lead in Christian settings.

For women in ministry in their thirties, these theological and cultural concerns combine with the unique stressors of the life stage they are in, such as having young children or making crucial vocation choices. With all of those things converging during this season of life, the task of growing as a woman leader during the thirties becomes a complicated one, at best. This paper will examine some of the critical factors facing women in their thirties as they develop as Christian leaders. Particular attention will be paid to the ideas about life structure and the “Age 30 transition” presented in Daniel J. Levinson’s Seasons of a Woman’s Life and J.R. Clinton’s work on ministry timelines. Critical factors for leadership development of women in their thirties that will be examined include: the unique challenges placed on women by marriage and family in the thirties, having those challenges either positively shape women as leaders or cause them to be thwarted or stunted in their growth, issues of identity development and the idea of “becoming one’s own woman”, and developing a leadership style that fits them while navigating the “double bind” women face as leaders.

There are some particular challenges for women as they proceed through their third decade of life. It is in one's thirties that family obligations are often most intense, particularly for women. Even if they had started a family in their twenties, their children are still very much in the home for much of this season; many more women have children that are quite young during this time. Additionally, the older generation, the parents of women in their thirties, often begin to require attention during this life stage as they retire or experience health difficulties. Vocationally, the exploration phase of the twenties may give way to a time of trying to hone in on a more specific career path. While it may not be until later life stages that life structure both at home and in the vocational realm is more satisfactorily arrived at, the thirties are a time of moving from simply setting up that life structure to rearranging it with more specificity, having to juggle a wide variety of responsibilities, and to do it all without the wisdom and experience intrinsic to later decades.

Daniel Levinson had this to say about early adulthood, a period he says encompasses both the twenties and thirties: "It is the adult era of greatest energy and abundance, and of greatest contradiction and stress... there can be crushing stresses, too: we undertake the burdens of parenthood and, at the same time, of forming an occupation; we incur heavy financial obligations when our earning power is still relatively low; we have to make crucially important choices regarding spouse, family, work, and lifestyle before we have the maturity or life experience to choose wisely. Early adulthood is the era in which we are most buffeted by our own passions and ambitions from within, and by the demands of family, community, and society from without."¹ Levinson's research, looking at the life stages of women through

¹ Daniel J. Levinson, *The Season's of a Woman's Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996), 19-20.

middle adulthood, was done primarily with women from the “Baby Boomer” and “Matures” generations. Amongst “Gen X” and “Gen Y”, women are more likely to delay marriage, having children, and even landing on a vocation until later into their twenties and thirties than in earlier generations. According the National Center for Health Statistics, the average age of women giving birth to their first child increased from 21.4 years to 25 years between 1970 and 2006. A major contribution to this rise was the number of women waiting to give birth until after 35 (1 out of 100 in 1970 versus 1 out of 12 in 2006). The increases are even more dramatic on the two coasts, both places with heavily populated urban centers where more women pursuing vocational goals before starting a family might be located.² Arguably, then, Levinson’s observations about tensions in the twenties and thirties are more applicable currently for women in their thirties or approaching that stage of life than those in their twenties.

Levinson’s work in The Season’s of a Woman’s Life is based around the concept of that the work of adulthood is to form and reform a life structure. The developmental phases of adulthood that Levinson delineates are formed around transitions women make to their life structures. He argues that marriage/family and occupation are the most common components of a life structure. Identity or one’s relationship to self is the next most prominent component; friendships, one’s connection to religion and/or politics, recreation, and bodily health are other potential aspects of one’s life structure.³ In Levinson’s construct of eras of adult development,

² National Center for Health Statistics, “Delayed Childbearing: More Women Are Having Their First Child Later in Life”; available from <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/databriefs/db21.pdf>; Internet; accessed 10 September 2009.

³ Levinson, *The Seasons of a Woman’s Life*, 22-24.

the twenties are spent making “key choices” and organizing “one’s life as a young adult”.⁴ At the “Age 30 Transition” (Levinson’s term), whatever got created as a life structure in the twenties gets reappraised. Levinson says this transition is “a time of moderate to severe developmental difficulty for most women and men”. The thirties are then spent forming a structure “within which we can try to establish a more secure place for ourselves in society and to accomplish our youthful dreams and goals”.⁵

J.R. Clinton’s work on Christian leadership development also has a chronological component, although his generalized time-line for Christian leaders is based solely on the developmental focus of each phase, not how old the person is. But like Levinson’s work, Clinton’s phases build on each other and are meant to be progressive. Clinton describes his “Phase IV: Life Maturing” as the following: “the leader has identified and issuing his or her spiritual gifts in a ministry that is satisfying... ministry itself takes on an increased relevance and fruitfulness.”⁶ This sounds strikingly similar to Levinson’s description of the Mid-Life Transition that occurs as one enters the forties: “The basic change is not simply in the work we do. Above all, it is in our relationship with occupation. We experience work and career from a more private, personal perspective. It becomes less important to ask, “How successful am I in the eyes of the world?” and more important to ask, “What do I give to and receive from my work? How satisfying is my relationship with work?”⁷ Unlike Levinson’s work, however, Clinton’s timeline does not assume automatic progression; movement from one phase to the next is based on the faithful completion/response to God. Clinton argues that most leaders do not

⁴ Ibid., 25.

⁵ Ibid., 26.

⁶ J. Robert Clinton, *The Making of a Leader* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1988), 46.

⁷ Levinson, *The Season’s of a Woman’s Life*, 374.

“finish well” but actually plateau.⁸ Clinton’s “finishing well” or successful progression through the ministry phases could be equated with Levinson’s creating a satisfying life structure for one’s self. Combining Levinson’s and Clinton’s theories, the thirties then should be about “ministry maturing” (Clinton’s Phase III) and forming a reasonably well set-up life structure, particularly in regards to the combination of occupation and marriage/family. Issues of identity begin to surface within the thirties in both constructs, becoming more aware of and operating in one’s spiritual gifts as well as deepening relationships with God and others for Clinton, and “becoming one’s woman” for Levinson. Combining these ideas, one could summarize the main developmental tasks of the thirties as: 1) settling into vocation and family, and 2) figuring out one’s identity.

For women these tasks can be quite complex. While there are certainly more options in terms of childcare or flexible vocational situations than in previous generations, it still remains more difficult for women to set up family within a life structure and to develop vocationally or as a leader simultaneously, particularly when compared to men. (What Levinson refers to as the marriage/family component of a life structure can be equated to Clinton’s idea of social base, which he defines as “the personal living environment out of which a leader operates” which provides emotional, economic, and strategic support, along with basic physical needs.)⁹ The biological demands of having children certainly contribute to this reality; even if a woman returns to her vocation full-time relatively quickly after childbirth, pregnancy and giving birth take a toll, and the emotional and physiological demands of nurturing an infant continue that depletion of resources. The impact of the so-called “biological clock” cannot be

⁸ Clinton, *The Making of a Leader*, 201.

⁹ J.R. Clinton, *Focused Lives* (Altadena, CA: Barnabas, 1995), 507.

underestimated as well. Not only is there societal pressure for women to marry and have children,¹⁰ women in their thirties who either have not married yet or have not had children yet are keenly aware that there may be a limitation on their options for at least the family component of their life structure if something does not change for them soon.

Men simply do not face the same pressures. There is no real male equivalent of the stigmatic “old maid” designation for unmarried women. There is no real biological deadline for men to start a family. Men typically do not have to decide whether to focus on family or career; either their wife will take care of the majority of the domestic tasks or at most, the couple will divide them up equally. In contrast, working moms tend to still take care of the majority of domestic concerns, statistically, regardless of their husbands’ vocational situations may be, resulting two jobs essentially. Elizabeth Glanville, in her dissertation on leadership development for Christian women in ministry, cites a 1998 study of ordained clergy by Barbara Zikmund, Adair Lummis, and Patricia Chang stating that the female clergy were far more likely to be single than their male counterparts. The study also confirmed the previous point; these clergy women faced more difficulties balancing vocation and family “because the primary responsibility for home and family still rests with the women”.¹¹ In the career women Levinson interviewed “...the husband might “help” her in certain ways with domestic chores but the wife was primarily responsible for household and child care. The wives suffered this imbalance with various mixtures of acquiescence, resentment, and inner conflict.”¹² Sally Helgesen, looking at Henry Mintzberg’s study of managers, notes that “men seemed to exist solely as managers

¹⁰ Levinson, *The Season’s of a Woman’s Life*, 82.

¹¹ Elizabeth L. Glanville, “Leadership Development for Women in Christian Ministry” (PhD diss., Fuller Seminary, 2000), 173.

¹² Levinson, *The Season’s of a Woman’s Life*, 370.

when they were on the job; it was as if their fatherhood and husbandhood existed in a vacuum”, in contrast to the female managers Helgesen studied who had “no choice” but to have a more integrated approach to the workplace and private sphere.¹³ Women can attempt to set up a life structure with both family and vocation as central, but with the “two jobs” reality, they will be forced to make decisions about where they expend resources in a way their male counterparts and spouses may not have to.

The internal and external pressure to set up a life structure that feels successful in both the domestic and vocational realms reaches a fever pitch in the thirties. A woman who hasn't landed on a set career path or found her mate in her twenties still “has time”. That time begins to disappear in the thirties. Levinson remarks that “whatever their motives... people in their thirties must “succeed”- must do better than most of their peers- or they will have to move elsewhere and perhaps endanger their careers.”¹⁴ Glanville, in her survey of women leaders, found that the desire for marriage remained strong through the thirties but began to drop off in the forties.¹⁵ Arguably, by the time women reach middle adulthood, which in Levinson's designations starts at age forty, they have come to terms with whatever is lacking from their lives, whether that be a spouse, children, or certain career experiences. Children are either not coming, grown or at least no longer infants in the forties. The forties for women thus can become a time reboot in either the domestic or vocational sphere, a “second adulthood” according to Gail Sheehy, as time to “flourish” and to “compose a more authentic self”, without as much pressure to add something in that had not been present earlier. A sense of equilibrium

¹³ Sally Helgesen, *The Female Advantage: Women's Ways of Leadership* (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 32, 33.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 338.

¹⁵ Glanville, “Leadership Development for Women in Christian Ministry”, 182.

or clarity about what the second adulthood will look like only comes after wrestling through various issues during what Sheehy calls the “Turbulent Thirties”, during which “everyone wants to be something more” than what they currently are.¹⁶

Women, therefore, must navigate a series of decisions, a range of emotions and a variety of societal pressures about family and careers in their thirties. A trade-off in these realms most likely is inevitable. If family takes precedence for this season, vocation may be slowed or put on hold. If vocational development is prioritized, options in marriage and family may be less possible or likely. The attempt to have a life structure that is satisfying in both family and career may come at the cost of self-identity, friendships or even health. Levinson remarked that “...the (women) lived on a treadmill, endlessly running to meet the requirements of a demanding career and needy family. It was almost impossible to get beyond these two top priorities and to be engaged as well in marriage, intimate relationships, friendships, leisure, and the self.”¹⁷

Under these circumstances leadership development for women in their thirties may seem close to impossible. However, there are some possibilities for development not just despite the tensions of the thirties but because of them. The point of Clinton’s “Phase III: Ministry Maturing” is not primarily the development of skills, although the emergence of spiritual gifts and the honing of abilities does occur during this phase. Rather, Clinton argues that the major developmental task of this phase is internal. “Ministry activity or fruitfulness is not focus of Phases I, II, and III. God is working primarily *in* the leader; not *through* him or her.”¹⁸ Spiritual,

¹⁶ Gail Sheehy, *New Passages* (New York: Random House, 1995), 52-53.

¹⁷ Levinson, *The Seasons of a Woman’s Life*, 37.

¹⁸ Clinton, *The Making of a Leader*, 80.

character and relational development experienced in the thirties and in the ministry maturing phase will form the basis for ministry output in the next season. Certainly, the myriad of issues and tensions women face in their thirties provide many opportunities to be shaped, tested, and formed.

Clinton lists a number of “process items”, experiences or lessons that God uses to shape leaders, during the ministry maturing phase. Entry and training make up two sub-phases of the larger ministry maturing phase, and their related process items include such things as beginning ministry tasks, discovery of spiritual gifts, and training experiences. In personal experience, these things occur typically in the twenties. However, the later sub-phases for ministry maturing are “relational learning” and “discernment”. These include process items such as gaining relational insights, conflict, faith challenge, prayer challenge and influence challenge. As women wrestle with family and vocational concerns, are forced to define their sense of call because of the tensions their various roles put on them, and perhaps even experience seasons of isolation (another process item for Clinton) as they go through the “motherhood season”, as Glanville refers to it,¹⁹ there certainly is plenty of opportunity for God to be shaping them. The process items for women may be more internally focused rather than ministry-oriented than may be the case for most men; a woman may experience a prayer challenge during a maternity leave while a man might experience it because of a ministry conflict, for example. But the opportunity to be developed by God as a leader may be equally present for both women and men in the thirties, just through different venues depending on their situations.

¹⁹ Glanville, “Leadership Development for Women in Christian Ministry”, 31.

Glanville, in her surveys of women in ministry, asked those with children how they had been shaped by marriage and family. They pointed to several things that had positively formed them, enhancements to their leadership development not despite of their family situation but because of it. These included becoming more flexible, being more people-centered and empathetic and “gaining life perspective”.²⁰ All of these seem to fit into Clinton’s sub-phases of relational learning and discernment as well. From a more corporate perspective, Sally Helgesen argues that women may be better managers than men precisely because of their experiences in the domestic realm. “Increasingly, motherhood is being recognized as an excellent school for managers, demanding many of the same skills: organization, pacing, the balancing of conflicting claims, teaching, guiding, leading, monitoring, handling disturbances, imparting information.”²¹ She believes that the very juggling act that makes women’s lives more complex also makes them better equipped for various challenges by causing them “to become well-integrated individuals with strong psychological and spiritual resources...”²² Such a positive take on what many consider a liability for women leaders, having to balance family and vocation to a greater degree than men, assumes quite a bit of work from women. They would have needed to be shaped by their domestic experiences, to have brought those lessons with them into the vocational realm, and to not have been stymied by the logistical realities of their lives. But Helgesen’s perspective certainly provides hope that the “motherhood season” may not delay the leadership development of women but even could enhance it as well.

²⁰ Glanville, “Leadership Development for Women in Christian Ministry”, 202.

²¹ Helgesen, *The Female Advantage: Women’s Ways of Leadership*, 31-32.

²² *Ibid.*, 33.

For women who remain single throughout the thirties or are married but without children, there may be similar developmental experiences for them internally. The societal expectations these women must navigate about their status in regards to marriage or motherhood could provide similar relational learning and discernment processing items. Additionally, women may end up being responsible for aging parents starting in this phase of life, something they are statistically more likely to do than men, making the experience of having to juggle family and vocational responsibilities common even for those women who are single or without children. “Women represent more than two-thirds of adults providing substantial assistance to elderly parents. Almost half of women between the ages of 43 and 54 provided some form of support to an aging parent.”²³

The category of gaining life perspective mentioned by the women in Glanville’s research resonates with Levinson’s construct of “becoming one’s own woman,” an experience of growing in self-identity he says begins to happen in the latter half of the thirties.²⁴ According to Levinson, one of the developmental tasks of the thirties appears to be wrestling with issues of identity. This seems to happen around the age of 36 for the women he interviewed, and involved them examining their life up to that point in preparation for creating a life structure based less on the expectations of needs of those around them but their own needs and interests instead. “Modern culture has little wisdom to offer the woman in her late thirties or beyond who seeks to grow more as a woman- to form richer, more mutual relationships, to

²³ Senate Joint Economic Committee, “Investing in Families Taking Care of Aging Parents”; available from <http://jec.senate.gov/archive/Documents/Reports/investinginfamiliestakingcareofelderlyparents.pdf>; Internet; accessed 15 September 2009.

²⁴ Levinson, *The Seasons of a Woman’s Life*, 145.

know more clearly what she wants, to gain a stronger sense of her own seniority and authority in the adult world,” Levinson opines.²⁵

In discussing the idea of “becoming one’s own woman”, Levinson echoes some of Clinton’s thinking about ministry phases building on each other. In Clinton’s time-line, a leader can get stuck or “plateau” at any phase as a result of not letting God form them in the developmental tasks of that phase. “Leaders often reach a point in the later stages of the Ministry Maturing phase in which their development seems to be arrested. This is the plateau barrier.”²⁶ For Levinson, middle adulthood will be reached regardless of what has transpired earlier. However, he argues that the degree to which a solid “Culminating Life Structure” has been created will determine what the woman is able to do in the next life stage. “A relatively satisfactory structure provides a basis on which a woman can expand her horizons and seek to live more fully than before. A less satisfactory structure impedes the developmental work.”²⁷ Both Clinton’s and Levinson’s material, then, affirm at least indirectly figuring out vocation and family and figuring out one’s identity as main developmental tasks of the thirties for women. If a woman will let whatever her family situation is have a maturing effect on her character/relationship with God/relationship with others, figures out a vocational path that will may keep her moving forward in leadership development, whether that be in direct or indirect ministry, formal or informal settings, and works on her identity as a daughter of God during her thirties, she will be in a good position to move into both middle adulthood and the “life maturing” phase with greater success.

²⁵ Ibid., 146.

²⁶ Clinton, *The Making of a Leader*, 114.

²⁷ Levinson, *The Seasons of a Woman’s Life*, 147.

One last area that may be critical for the development of women in their thirties is the discovery of a leadership style that fits them. By this point, unless they have experienced a major delay in entering into a ministry realm, some realization of spiritual gifts will have already occurred. Either through experiences or training, they will have also received some amount of equipping for leadership. Two factors will make it more crucial for women to begin to work on discovering their own leadership style during this stage. The demands of family concerns on women may require them to create new ways of leading in order to accommodate all that they are juggling. Glanville points out that women in general need to be more flexible in their approach to ministry, citing a different source of Sally Helgesen's work, *Everyday Revolutionaries: Working Women and the Transformation of American Life*. "According to (Helgesen's) study, women are leading the way in finding new ways to do business, even creating new businesses, working out of the home and flexing their schedules to meet the demands of motherhood and family life..."²⁸

Secondly, with the training in leadership/ministry women may have received in their twenties, there was most likely very little attention paid to differences in leadership styles, particularly between the genders. Since the model for leadership in our society and within the church tends to be predicated on a very male-oriented "hero-leader" model, women may need to develop or discover new leadership styles that fit them better as they move into their thirties. Carol Becker states, "Our definition of a good leader matches the ways in which men are socialized to behave... we have long believed that the maverick hero male style is the most effective for a true leader." She goes on to point out that until more recently not enough

²⁸ Glanville, "Leadership Development for Women in Christian Ministry", 217.

women were in leader positions to challenge this stereotype of leadership. “Women have demonstrated effective leadership using a radically different style. In so doing, we have enlarged our vision of the possible leadership styles available to all of us.”²⁹ The more participatory style Becker argues that women use is in contrast to the more authoritarian mode widely-regarded as what a “true” leader would utilize.

Additionally, in the thirties women may be entering into higher-ranking leadership positions. As they move higher organizationally in whatever ministry or institution they are a part of, they may begin to encounter what Catalyst, a research and advisory organization on women’s roles in the workplace, calls “the double bind”. “As Catalyst research confirms, despite the numerous business contributions of women leaders, men are still largely seen as the leaders by default. It’s what researchers call the “think-leader-think-male” mindset. As “atypical leaders,” women are often perceived as going against the norms of leadership or those of femininity. Caught between impossible choices, those who try to conform to traditional—i.e., masculine—leadership behaviors are damned if they do, doomed if they don’t.”³⁰ Catalyst details three predicaments they say women leaders face: 1) that women leaders are considered either too soft or too tough, but never just right, 2) that women leaders face higher standards and lower rewards than male leaders, and 3) that women leaders are perceived as competent or likable but rarely both.³¹

Beginning to navigate the “double bind” and the implications of these three predicaments will most likely be part of the development tasks of a woman in ministry in her thirties unless

²⁹ Carol E. Becker, *Becoming Colleagues* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 49, 51.

³⁰ Catalyst, “The Double Bind Dilemma for Women in Leadership: Damned if You Do, Doomed if You Don’t”, Catalyst Organization, 2007, 1.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 8.

she is only just beginning to enter into leadership at this stage. It may not be until middle adulthood or the “life maturing” phase that a woman has more successfully resolved these tensions for herself, but some work on understanding what “feminine leadership” may look like and specifically how she personally wants to function as a woman leader will be important in order for further development to take place.

Given all of these particular issues facing the leadership development of women in ministry in their thirties, there are several implications. The critical importance of the thirties is immediately apparent. Whatever life structure or ministry women may have later in life is somewhat dependent on how successfully they navigate this particular season. As Clinton pointed out, it is in the ministry maturing phase that many leaders plateau. But while women in their thirties need to be aware of the significance of how they are developing during this season, it may also be helpful for them to be aware of the transitory nature of this stage. The pressures on them in regards to marriage and family will not always look the same as expectations about marriage and children lessen as they enter into their forties or as children grow older. There may be chances to start over and experience the “second adulthood” that Sheehy refers to as women move into the forties; they do not have to have the entirety of their lives figured out before they reach that stage.

But in order to be well set up for both middle adulthood and the life maturing phase, per Levinson and Clinton respectively, women do need to have a learning posture throughout their thirties. The woman that lets herself be disciplined by God through her family situation, who is figuring out what it means to lead authentically as a female, who is visioning for her vocational development, who is becoming her own woman as a Christian, a leader, a daughter, mother,

wife and as a friend... she will be in the best place to become all of who God has meant her to be.

Perhaps the best resource women in their thirties could have is other women who are farther down the journey. Older women who have already navigated with some success the balance of family and ministry, who have figured out their identity as women leaders, and who have experienced the “turbulent thirties” as a blessing to their development rather than a detriment are best positioned to provide both hope and practical advice on what it looks like to come out the other side. Thankfully with the emergence of more and more women into places of leadership within the realm of Christian ministry, there are more potential mentors in these areas than ever before.

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