

Leading like Lydia

by [Carol Howard Merritt](#) in the [March 2, 2016](#) issue



Emily Scott at St. Lydia's in Brooklyn. Photo by Margaret McGhee.

Emily Scott, pastor of St. Lydia's in Brooklyn (ELCA), was chatting with a group of church-planting women on Twitter. She wrote, "I'd be interested in hearing about methods for planting used by women." When she exhausted her 140-character limit, she started another tweet. "I know the way I've planted church has been different from my male colleagues' approach." Other women on the stream concurred.

Scott's observation stuck with me. Do women plant churches differently than men? I asked [Stephanie Spellers](#), who is canon to the presiding bishop in evangelism and reconciliation efforts of the Episcopal Church. Spellers planted [the Crossing](#), an Episcopal church in Boston, and has worked with a wide range of church leaders. Do women use different methods or a different style than men do?

Spellers said, "Women are more culturally conditioned and rewarded for mastering the art of collaboration, mutuality, and listening." These skills have become important for church planting.

Spellers and I were born just before Title IX prohibited discrimination on the basis of sex in federally funded education. The law had a profound effect on our generation, especially in sports. Spellers grew up watching women's basketball games and was fascinated by how the women worked together as a team. She studied the dynamic of the court, and she talked about how that dynamic might be seen when women are planting churches.

"There are several paradigms of church planting," Spellers explained. "Often there is a charismatic, strong leader." Spellers called this the "Father Knows Best" church, referring to a popular 1950s radio and television program. Yet, since North American and European churches are in decline, we've begun to challenge this model. "Is this a cult of personality? Is there a daddy on top that everyone takes care of?"

As we ask these questions, the experiences of women who've planted communities emerge. "If you're starting fresh, then you can create a culture that is collaborative and mutual from the beginning. A lot of church planters are drawn to the mutuality. They sense the Spirit in it," Spellers said.

Today we have more paradigms that include shared leadership and preaching. The vision of the group is held not by one person, but by a group of leaders who believe that the wisdom of the community is greater than the wisdom of one person.

When Spellers started the Crossing, for instance, she did not assume that her education would make her the only qualified person to preach. Instead she realized that she had tools that would help her teach *other* community members to preach. As a result, laypeople preached for the first three years at the Crossing.

"These are *womanish* acts," Spellers said with a generous laugh as she referred to Alice Walker and her use of the black feminist term that means "doing things that feel very natural"—and often referring to audacious, outrageous, or courageous behavior. While noting that many men have these qualities too, Spellers calls for churches to "invite women to lead more." Womanish acts can bring innovation and energy to the church.

Because women are culturally rewarded for deep listening, listening tends to be a part of communities planted by women. "Church planters today are about listening to the cultural context and the neighborhood, and listening for what the Spirit is doing," Spellers said. She describes church planting as someone gathering a community of people together to listen for the Spirit moving in their particular place.

Spellers has experienced this type of community at [St. Lydia's Dinner Church in Brooklyn](#).

In the book of Acts, Lydia was a gentile woman who worshiped God; on the Sabbath she gathered with a group of women by the river to pray. One day Paul and his friends joined the women, and Paul's words moved her so much that Lydia invited the men to stay in her home. A little later in the biblical narrative, when Paul and company were released from prison, they returned to her house. They wanted to encourage the brothers and sisters who were gathered there in what had become a house church.

About 2,000 years later in Brooklyn, Lydia's hospitality continues in the form of a dinner church. "St. Lydia's evokes the experience of going into a woman's house church," Spellers said. Worship takes place around a big meal that the community cooks together. "St. Lydia's has the warmth and nourishment of women-shaped communities. There's an emphasis on welcome, and many people are leading. Everyone takes part in setting the table and cleaning up."

In general, Spellers believes that the best of women's communities can be seen in new churches. "They are looking out for 'the least of these.' They are leaning into the wisdom. They can play into the beautiful beloved community, understanding that any one person's diminishment is the diminishment of everyone. Those are mama values. And they are available to everyone."