



Beyond Labels, Toward Calling

When I was 12 years old, my Sunday school superintendent told me that she would be on vacation the following week, during which time I would be “in charge”—collecting attendance notebooks and offerings from all the teachers and reporting any news back to her when she returned. I was stunned. “Me, in charge?” I thought to myself. “I’m just a kid. My mom isn’t even a Christian! Surely, she’s made a mistake.”

But Enid Rios Rivera had made no mistake. She recognized something in me at that age that no one had ever seen before. And that promotion (temporary, but oft-repeated) from nursery-supervisor/baby-bottom-cleaner extraordinaire to substitute superintendent changed the course of my life. Sunday school was the context in which that change took place, and a woman was the instrument that God used to give me my first chance at leadership.

And so at a young age I was comfortable with leadership responsibilities. But growing up as a Puerto Rican female, and initially unfamiliar with God’s thoughts on women as revealed in his Word and in the life of his Son, I was not particularly disturbed by the machismo I observed in the male leadership of my church. That type of behavior was expected in my culture

and, although I was hurt by it, I accepted it as the way things were.

But as I got more involved in city-wide and even national events and partnerships through my 10-year involvement as an employee of the Latino Pastoral Action Center (www.lpacministries.com), the disparaging attitude about women in ministry leadership did start to offend me, especially when I realized that it was not limited to Latino men but was prevalent within the broader church. Rather than remaining in resentment or even joining the debate, however, I felt called to give voice and visibility to women in my circle of influence so they could fulfill their God-given destiny.

In 1996 I founded the Center for Emerging Female Leadership (CEFL), and Enid Rios Rivera—the woman who gave me my first leadership opportunity back in Sunday school—joined me as ministry partner and associate director (she also became my sister-in-law and was the first full-time female pastor to be installed in the Primitive Christian Church). CEFL was born from my belief that the gospel promotes a radical equality that extends across the artificial gender, racial, and socioeconomic barriers that humans love to erect. And so, like many of the sisters who have gone before me and many who now walk alongside me in the journey, I move onward toward the high calling that God has placed on my life and seek to help other women do the same.

Honored to author this new column on issues related to women in ministry,

I have decided to call it *In Like Manner... the Women*, because in various epistles Paul used these words to state similarities between men’s and women’s roles. Rather than join the theological debate on women in ministry, this column will tell the stories of women who themselves have put the debate on the shelf and have gone on to “just do it.” It will also identify and tell stories about the issues that trouble women in ministry. My ultimate hope is that readers will go beyond spirit-stifling attempts either to label others or to accept labels ascribed to them by others, so that all can go forward to fulfill their calling regardless of gender.

Many women have determined that they have no time to squander on the “great debate” and are mobilizing themselves by the thousands to fulfill what we are all here for: Christ’s Great Commission. They have gone beyond the labels and are moving toward their call. Their mantra? Lead, follow, or get out of the way.

Join me here in the next issue for some storytelling! ■

Elizabeth D. Rios is a bi-vocational lead pastor of a church plant called Wounded Healer Fellowship (www.woundedhealerfellowship.com) in Pembroke Pines, Fla., where she lives with her husband and two sons. Founder of the Center for Emerging Female Leadership (www.cefl.org), Rios is also a doctoral candidate in organizational leadership at Nova Southeastern University and consultant to faith-based nonprofit agencies. Visit her weblog at <http://latinaliz.typepad.com>.