

## **Exploring Asian Female Pastors' Leadership Roles in the Church: Using Deborah's Story**

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*Women in many Christian cultures are told that men are strong and should lead the church. Consequently, some women rationalize that they should not assume top leadership roles in the church. When they do assume such roles, many female pastors experience challenges. The purpose of our qualitative case study was to give voice to Asian female pastors (AFPs) by having them share challenges they experienced in the Taiwanese Presbyterian Church and relate those challenges to the experiences of Deborah in the biblical story found in Judges 4 and 5. Reported in this paper are the results of focus groups centered on a feminist commentary of Deborah's story. The voices of the AFPs speak to reconstruct traditional patriarchal theological thought. Key Words: Leadership, Asian Female Pastors, Deborah, Women in the Bible, Feminism, Qualitative Research, and Case Study*

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### **Introduction**

The Presbyterian Church in Taiwan (PCT) has been striving to promote women to leadership roles within the Church. In the PCT, women can be selected as deaconesses and elders, and women also can be ordained as pastors. Although some of them have assumed such leadership roles, pervasive patriarchal views still dominate the church.

Lin (2003) reports that many Asian Christian women and female pastors are told that men lead the church, and men are strong. Therefore, women rationalize that they should not assume leadership roles in the church. When women do assume leadership roles in the church, many female pastors experience hardships. For example, Sou (2005) states that female pastors need to work twice as hard as male pastors in order to be accepted and appreciated by their congregations. Particular to Asian women, this kind of ideology for women playing a subordinate role is deeply rooted in the patriarchal value of the Taiwanese community (Lu, 1990). Additionally, Se (1996) reports, "The Church often thinks that women should be men's assistants. Women's roles are to support and encourage men [Gen. 2:18]. Women are often too emotional to make good decisions; therefore, they cannot assume important decision-making roles" (p. 14).

Traditional values present challenges for Taiwanese Christian women and, more specifically, for female pastors whose responsibility is to provide leadership in the church. However, the societal expectation for women is contrary to their leadership roles. The purpose of our case study was to give voice to Asian female pastors (AFPs) as they shared their challenges experienced in the Taiwanese Presbyterian Church and as they

related those challenges to the experiences in the biblical story of Deborah found in Judges 4 and 5. In our study, we used a phenomenological case study (Creswell, 2003) that included focus group discussions centered on a feminist commentary of Deborah's story which brought forward AFPs' experiences as a foundation to the reconstruction of traditional patriarchal theological thought.

### **Theoretical Background**

We chose to use the story of Deborah (Judges 4-5) as a discussion point for Taiwanese Presbyterian female pastors' considerations of their leadership challenges in the church. Therefore, the theoretical framework is based in this story from the Bible. Feminist theology<sup>1</sup> provides an added dimension to the theoretical framework. We first share information related to feminist theology, then we share the theoretical framework related to Deborah's story from the Bible.

### **The Rise of Feminist Theology**

Greene-McCreight (2000) finds Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872) to be one of the closest intellectual and theological forebears of feminist theology. Greene-McCreight quotes from Feuerbach to support his tenet of modern theology: "Since we moderns are committed to the full equality of the sexes, our theology must express that commitment; therefore, we should not speak of God in masculine terms (at least unless they are balanced by feminine terms)" (p. 30).

Feminist theologians read the Bible as an authority with a different perspective than that of traditional Christian theologians. According to traditional historical criticism, the biblical texts were written by priests and prophets; thus, they represent the religious norms of these priests and prophets. Any religious activities outside this circle of these clergies were viewed as heterodox and rejected as deviant (Greene-McCreight, 2000). In contrast, feminist theology denoted that biblical texts were shaped by historical, social, and political factors (Greene-McCreight). Some feminist theologians, such as Fiorenza (1992), question the context of the Bible by noting that all traditional religious names, texts, rituals, laws, and interpretive metaphors bear *our Father's names*. She insisted that women's self-affirmation, survival, power, and self-determination are the central spiritual and religious feminist quests (Greene-McCreight). Lerner (1986) also adopts the attitude of being skeptical toward every known system of thought and being critical of all assumptions, or ordering values and definitions. Harris (1989) proposes to take "the attitude of disbelief, for it will nurture Awakening. ... if we want to take on our vocation to be bearers and birthers of the real God- the God who is God- then we must learn to practice disbelief" (p. 18). Thus, many feminist theologians critically examined traditional theological perspectives while forming their own theology.

In the formation of their theology, feminist theologians claimed that women's experiences are an important basis upon which to reconstruct traditional theology

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<sup>1</sup> Asked recently why we did not include womanist theology as a theoretical frame, we respond that this womanist theology is particularly related to African American Christian women in the United States (Thomas, 1998) and would not be appropriate for our particular international Asian sample. Feminist theology was more akin to the basis of the study.

(Greene-McCreight, 2000). For example, Berliner (1992) emphasizes the significance of women's experiences "because we are all living examples of women in today's world and church" (p. 3). Lerner (1986) insists that women should trust their own experience. She states:

Since women's experience has usually been trivialized or ignored, it means overcoming the deep-seated resistance within ourselves toward accepting ourselves and our knowledge as valid. It means getting rid of the great men in our heads and substituting for them ourselves, our sisters, our anonymous foremothers. (p. 228)

Fiorenza (1992) states that "liberation theologians and critical theorists have made us aware that all discourses represent political interests. Meaning is always politically constructed insofar as commentary is located in social networks of power/knowledge relations that shape society" (p. 3). In this sense, feminist commentary asks: "What does it mean to interpret Scripture as a feminist, and how can feminist biblical hermeneutics situate its readings of the Bible in such a way that they do not duplicate the patriarchal discourse of subordination and obedience?" (Fiorenza, p. 19). Fiorenza suggests that the way to do this is to reclaim "the theological subjectivity of women in shaping and determining biblical religions" (p. 20). Further, Fiorenza states, "biblical women's studies have asked new questions in order to recover women's biblical heritage, a religious empowerment for the present and the future" (p. 20).

### **Biblical Narrative of Deborah's Leadership**

The narrative of Deborah is unique in the Book of Judges in the Bible. The leadership story is as follows. During the time when Israel had no kings, the Nation was ruled by judges who protected the people from its enemies, the Canaanites. Deborah was a prophetess, a judge, and a military leader of Israel when no men were willing to lead. Deborah was the only woman recorded in the history of Israel who held that position and office. As a judge, she held court under a palm tree where she instructed people in the Torah and helped them settle their disputes. In her role as a military leader, Deborah called upon the warrior, Barak, to lead 10,000 men to fight the Canaanites. Barak followed her lead, but insisted that he needed her presence. Barak said to Deborah if she went with him, he would go; however, if she did not go with him, he would not go. Deborah went with Barak, but warned him that the honor of the conquest could potentially go to a woman instead of him. Deborah was accurate. At the end, the Canaanites were defeated, and Sisera, the general, was killed by Jael, a woman. Deborah, Barak, and the Israelites sang a victory song in Judges Chapter 5. Thus, Deborah came to be considered a true leader in the history of Israel.

### **Deborah- A Great Female Leader**

Several biblical researchers have commented on the leadership characteristics of Deborah (Assis, 2008; Gottlieb, 2001; Higgs, 2007). Higgs, for example, points out that Deborah "was a renowned prophetess, an honored judge, and an ideal role model for

every woman” (p. 22). As an objective leader, according to Higgs, Deborah put aside her personal agenda in order to serve others, as she carried out her vision and responsibility with courage, wisdom, and action. Resisting the urge to take credit, Deborah insisted on following higher principles to truly lead others and validate others’ work. Higgs concludes that Deborah was a success story of a “*do right*” (p. 23) female leader.

Gottlieb (2001) states that Deborah was always visible and available for those who needed her. He contends that the years of her persistent commitment impacted the morale of the Israelites. Choosing the right time to make her political stand, she called in the Israelite general, Barak, to do the actual fighting. Deborah “adopted the dominating part, exhorting, chiding, inspiring and igniting with her own tremendous spirit. There is a reversal of conventional roles” (Gottlieb, p. 195). She assumed the role of the commissioner by giving commands to the warrior leader, Barak, to pursue the enemy. Gottlieb notes that even Barak needed Deborah’s actual presence and support while he was at battle, a further illustration of the power of authority Deborah possessed.

Assis (2006) describes Deborah as “a unique protagonist in comparison with other heroes” of the Book of Judges. Outstanding as a woman, a prophetess and a judge, Deborah acted “in a well-established place of judgment” (Assis, 2006, p. 119) and she sat “in a position of judicial authority” (Assis, 2006, p. 119). Assis comments that the double female form, *female prophetess*, had made Deborah’s leadership as a woman prominent. Gender definitely played a significant role in the plot with Deborah as an action-oriented prophetess who commissioned Barak as a military leader to fight against the Canaanite oppressors. Deborah, the commissioner, conducted the battle while Barak merely implemented it. According to Assis, “Barak’s positive response to Deborah’s call illustrated the leadership ability of Deborah as a ‘publicly recognized institution, rather than as a charismatic character’” (2006, p. 118).

Through the literature review, we identified that feminist theology has been making efforts to provide different perspectives for reading the Bible. For example, when reading Deborah’s story, feminist perspectives emphasized Deborah’s leadership instead of Barak’s leadership. However, no existing literature on Asian female pastors (AFPs), either English or Mandarin, has been found that relates to feminist theology. This pioneer study is the only one of its kind that represents a significant contribution because it recognized and introduced the unique experiences of Asian female pastors. This study was designed to address the gap by having AFPs’ voices heard and understood.

## Research Questions

In our study, we used a phenomenological case study (Creswell, 2003) that included focus group discussions centered on a feminist commentary of Deborah’s story which brought forward AFPs’ experiences as a foundation to the reconstruction of traditional patriarchal theological thought. Our research question was: How do Asian female pastors serving in a leadership role in the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan consider their experiences in relation to the experiences of Deborah (Judges 4 & 5)?

**Role of the researchers.** One of our researchers has been a member of Presbyterian Church in Taiwan for her entire life and as a part of clerical system of this

same church for 19 years. Her own experience was used as a part of this study. As a female pastor in the Presbyterian Church system, she identifies with many other female pastors who feel grateful and blessed that the church chose to give men and women equal opportunity to receive theological education from seminary and to be ordained as pastors after completing all the requirements. However, female pastors still face challenges daily from working in a system which religiously and culturally practices gender bias and discrimination against women. For example, when a church considers hiring a new pastor, the first question asked about a candidate is the person's gender. If the candidate is a female, the recruitment tends not to give the applicant a second thought even if the candidate has outstanding qualities and characteristics which might meet the church's expectations very well. Se (2007) says that although the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan ordained its first woman pastor in 1950, and in the past ten years, 200 female evangelists (pastors included) have joined in the Church system, still, it is very hard for female pastors to be genuinely accepted by the churches because of traditional biblical views and the old fashioned cultural views. The church background of our researcher helped her to relate better to the participants, to facilitate group discussions, and to build trust with the participants. As Creswell (1998) stated, feminist research approaches "place the researcher within the study so as to avoid the objectification, and to conduct research that is transformative" (p. 83).

The other three researchers contribute to this study by offering their knowledge on qualitative research, conducting triangulation, reading, and providing credibility. One of the three researchers is Chinese and understands the language; therefore, his check for interpretation of the comments from Chinese to English provided a critical assessment for accuracy. The other two researchers are familiar with the culture, the biblical stories, and feminist interpretation. They are researchers in women's leadership issues and have developed a leadership theory inclusive of female voices. We are either feminists or subscribe to feminist ideology.

## **Method**

### **Research Design**

This phenomenological case study explored the meaning of the lived experiences of Asian female pastors who play leadership roles in the Church, yet are the minorities in the group of church leaders because of their gender. According to Gall, Gall, and Borg (2003), the three purposes of case studies are "to produce detailed descriptions of a phenomenon, to develop possible explanations of it, or to evaluate the phenomenon" (p. 439). This research design is appropriate in understanding and describing the leadership of the AFPs. Additionally, feminist approaches were adopted in that the first researcher was placed within the gender research itself. Lather (1991) suggests that feminist inquiry aims to "correct both the invisibility and distortion of female experience in ways relevant to ending women's social unequal position" (p. 71).

We used a researcher-developed feminist commentary to Deborah's story in the Bible to facilitate AFPs in the focus groups to talk about their own experiences as church clergy. As Creswell (1998) states:

The feminist researcher might engage in procedures such as the following: Conduct sequential interviews in an interactive, dialogic manner that entails self-disclosure on the part of the researcher and fosters a sense of collaboration. Conduct group interviews that provide potential for deeper probing and reciprocally educative encounter. (p. 83)

In this study, we formed focus groups in order for AFPs to have a safe environment to share their lived stories. The steps that we took were to: (a) write a feminist commentary, (b) select participants (c) form focus groups, (d) conduct focus groups, (e) analyze the collected data, and (f) report the outcomes. The following introduces more details and the rationale for our choice of participants, the commentary, the focus groups, the procedures, and data analysis for this study.

## **Participants**

The proposal of this study was sent to and approved by the Institutional Review Board of Sam Houston State University. The 27 participants in the study were Christian female pastors selected from PCT. In order to participate in this study, these participants needed to have at least three years of experience serving in a local church or church organization. Three years was set as a criterion because the PCT requires its evangelists and pastors to serve at least three years in a local church or in a church organization before they are ordained. The participants were recruited from the Female Pastors Association in Taiwan; participation was voluntary. The participants held leadership positions in the PCT for three to 20 years, and all of them held at least one master's level degree. Three of them held a second master's degree in addition to the Master of Divinity degree. An invitation to participate in the study was sent through e-mails to 150 female pastors who are members of the Female Pastor Association. Twenty-eight female pastors agreed to spend a full day participating in focus groups. Because the pastors share common gender and religious backgrounds, these commonalities enabled them to understand and share deeply their experiences with each other intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually.

## **Biblical Text and Feminist Commentary**

Following is (a) the biblical text of Judges 4:4-10 and 5:7 and 12 in *Today's English Version (Revised Edition)*. What the participants read in the focus group session was the Chinese translation of the *Today's English Version (Revised Edition)*. The English version is also provided here for the readers of this article to have a better understanding of the context of Deborah's story, and (b) a feminist commentary of Deborah's story written in Chinese. Two of the researchers read the English translation of the Chinese commentary and made revisions before the commentary piece was provided to the participants. The feminist commentary was written in Chinese for the participants. We, the authors, place both Chinese and English versions here to increase the credibility of the study. The feminist commentary was prepared by the Taiwanese female pastor on our research team and edited by two Taiwanese female pastors and three researchers whose expertise are in feminist study. This process was done to have a

credible representation of the feminist perspective for Taiwanese female pastors. The commentary then was provided at the beginning of the focus group session immediately after the participants had read the Bible passage about Deborah.

**Judges 4: 4-21; 5:7 & 12 (Today's English Version)**

4:4 Now Deborah, the wife of Lappidoth, was a prophet, and she was serving as a judge for the Israelites at that time. 5 She would sit under a certain palm tree between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim, and the people of Israel would go there for her decisions. 6 One day she sent for Barak son of Abinoam from the city of Kedesh in Naphtali and said to him, "The Lord, the God of Israel, has given you this command: Take ten thousand men from the tribes of Naphtali and Zebulun and lead them to Mount Tabor. 7 I will bring Sisera, the commander of Jabin's army, to fight you at the Kishon River. He will have his chariots and soldiers, but I will give you victory over him." 8 Then Barak replied, "I will go if you go with me, but if you don't go with me, I won't go either." 9 She answered, "All right, I will go with you, but you won't get any credit for the victory, because the Lord will hand Sisera over to a woman." So Deborah set off for Kedesh with Barak. 10 Kedesh, and then a thousand men followed him. Deborah went with him. 11 In the meantime Heber the Kenite had set up his tent close to Kedesh near the oak tree at Zanannim. He had moved away from the other Kenites, the descendants of Hobab, the brother-in-law of Moses.

12 When Sisera learned that Barak had gone up to Mount Tabor, 13 he called out his nine hundred iron chariots and all his men, and sent them from Harosheth-of-the-Gentiles to the Kishon River. 14 Then Deborah said to Barak, "Go! The Lord is leading you! Today he has given you victory over Sisera." So Barak went down from Mount Tabor with his ten thousand men. 15 When Barak attacked with his army, the LORD threw Sisera into confusion together with all his chariots and men. Sisera got down from his chariot and fled on foot. 16 Barak pursued the chariots and the army to Harosheth-of-the-Gentiles, and Sisera's whole army was killed. Not a man was left. 17 Sisera ran away to the tent of Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, because King Jabin of Hazor was at peace with Heber's family. 18 Jael went out to meet Sisera and said to him, "Come in, sir; come into my tent. Don't be afraid." So he went in, and she hid him behind a curtain. 19 He said to her, "Please give me a drink of water; I'm thirsty." She opened a leather bag of milk, gave him a drink, and hid him again. 20 Then he told her, "Stand at the door of the tent, and if anyone comes and asks you if anyone is here, say no."

21 Sisera was so tired that he fell sound asleep. Then Jael took a hammer and a tent peg, quietly went up to him, and killed him by driving the peg right through the side of his head and into the ground.

5:7 The towns of Israel stood abandoned, Deborah; they stood empty until you came, came like a mother for Israel.

5: 12a Lead on, Deborah, lead on! Lead on! Sing a song! Lead on.

### 底波拉的英雌領導 (Feminist Commentary) 士師記 4: 4-21; 5: 7&12a

原來這麼久遠以前，如底波拉一樣受人尊敬的女先知與女士師就已經出現，真不知道為什麼現代還有人反對封牧女傳道人?!底波拉的故事與前幾個故事中的女性比較，呈現出一個強烈的對比。不知道底波拉身為一個女性存在於男性稱霸的世界裡，她是如合成長並承接了當時如此重要的領導角色，不知她的領導風格又是如何的領導風格? 她很強勢嗎? 在男性引領風騷的世代，她需要常常肯定自己的角色以至於可以勇往直前嗎? 如果有人因她的性別而質疑她的領導權，她是如何面對的? 經文中的線索，我們可以得知當時的以色列民眾素常來到底波拉那裡，請她主持公道。可見他的領導權與她的意見相當受到民眾的尊重與肯定，是一個尊重民意、非指導式的領導權。她沒有過當地使用身為一個先知與士師的權力。她讓民眾自己決定是否要來尋求她的意見。

當底波拉告訴巴拉上主要巴拉去迎戰西西拉，巴拉告訴底波拉說：「如果你跟我去，我就去；你不跟我去，我就不去。」可見連巴拉都甚仰賴底波拉，相信有她同行，便勝利在握。在那個時候，人信賴依靠女人的故事以警存在。

此段戰爭的故事之後記載了一首底波拉與巴拉之歌，5 章 7 節說：「底波拉啊，以色列的城鎮被拋棄，空無一人，直到你來；你來做以色列的母親」，12 節說：「底波拉啊，興起! 奮發! 歌唱，勇往直前!」這凱歌所給予底波拉身為女性領導相當高的肯定與讚賞，她被視為一位保護者、解救者、她復原了以色列的眾邦城。底波拉扮演的這些角色都不是傳統的女性角色。



Greene-McCreight (2000) 說女性神學家認為女性經驗是重新建構傳統神學的基礎。底波拉令人興奮的成功經驗應該重複地在教會中傳誦，女性也可以因為受到肯定而對教會有更大的貢獻，如同底波拉對以色列的貢獻。Learner (1986) 主張，“我們應該以自己，以我們姊妹的面像來替代我們頭腦中的男性” (p. 228)。在這篇文章中，巴拉不是重點，以色列再那個烽火交天的時代如何存活也不是本文的重點。我特別要強調討論的是一個女性，底波拉，在一個父權社會中以她獨特的領導權出眾地領導以色列民眾。願台灣長老教會的眾信徒也給于我們的女傳同樣的認同與欣賞。也盼望這樣的註解可以幫助我們減少“複製父權價值所要求的女性順服” (Fiorenza 1992, p. 19)。

### **Heroine's Leadership: Deborah (Feminist Commentary)**

From ancient biblical times, outstanding female leaders existed. According to the biblical account of Deborah in Judges, female prophets and judges such as Deborah were respected by male judges and Israelites. I have observed that there are people opposed to women being pastors and leaders in today's church. Readers may wonder how Deborah assumed such an important position in a patriarchal time. Furthermore, questions arise concerning the kind of leadership style Deborah demonstrates. Was she powerful? Did she need to do a lot of self-affirmation in a male dominant world? How did she survive whenever patriarchal values questioned her leadership? The text (Judges 4: 5) states that Deborah would sit under a palm tree and the people of Israel would come to her for decisions. This phenomenon intimates that Deborah must have built a great reputation and trustworthiness for people to come to her on their own accord, asking for guidance. She established a different model of leadership from dominant and directive leadership styles. Deborah made herself accessible to people. She did not abuse her power as a judge to force people to ask for her guidance. She let people decide for themselves whether they wanted to seek her words of wisdom. Even the brave fighter, Barak, wanted her to go to the war with him. He said to her, "I will go if you go with me, but if you don't go with me, I won't go either" (Judges 4: 8). This demonstrates how much Barak, a man, counted on the advice of Deborah, a woman.

At the end of Deborah's story, a song was written to praise Deborah. Judges Chapter 5, verse 7 says, "The towns of Israel stood abandoned, Deborah; they stood empty until you came, came like a mother for Israel." Deborah was considered a decisive problem solver, protector, and a rescuer who restored the abandoned towns of Israel. These were not

conventional roles for women during that time. Verse 12 continues, “Lead on, Deborah, lead on! Lead on! Sing a song! Lead on!...” Her leadership was validated and praised. People viewed her as a strong leader.

Greene-McCreight (2000) stated that in the formation of their theology, feminist theologians claimed that women's experiences are an important base to reconstruct traditional theology. Deborah's successful experience should be told over and over again to today's church and today's women; in return, women in today's church can assert themselves more, and the church can rely on female pastors' leadership as did Israel in the case of Deborah. Lerner (1986) advocated, “getting rid of the great men in our heads and substituting for them ourselves, our sisters, our anonymous foremothers” (p. 228). In this feminist commentary, the focus is not on Barak as a warrior nor on Israel as a country facing a formidable threat from its enemy. Rather, the focus of this commentary is about how Deborah, a woman in an ancient patriarchal world, strived to lead people without fear. Deborah's leadership was emphasized when reading Judges 4 and 5 in the hope that readers could learn a way of reading the Bible that does not “duplicate the patriarchal discourse of subordination and obedience” (Fiorenza, 1992, p. 19).

## **Procedure**

During five focus group sessions, Deborah's story was read and then the feminist commentary (Chinese version) was provided for the participants to read before discussion began. The participants in the focus groups were asked to discuss the following questions after reading the commentary: (a) What is your general feedback after reading this story (again), (b) what is your feedback after reading the commentary, (c) how similar or different is your leadership from Deborah's leadership, (d) what is the support that you have been getting from PCT when you assume leadership as a female pastor, and (e) what are the barriers that you have been facing when you assume leadership as a female pastor. These open-ended questions provided participants opportunities to share their personal experience without leading them in any particular direction. Next, the researcher who conducted the focus groups in Taiwan asked the participants about their perceptions of the story as it related to feminist perspectives. Participants were encouraged to respond by using their own experiences as examples.

## **Method of Data Collection: Focus Groups**

One of the researchers conducted the five focus groups in Taiwan as she is the researcher who also is the Taiwanese female pastor and could establish trust with the participants better than the other three researchers. Twenty-eight participants were assigned to one of five focus groups according to the geographical locations of their ministries. These five groups were conducted in four cities scattered throughout Taiwan. Each group of AFPs spent a day together; however, the focus group session for addressing Deborah's story was 90 minutes in length. The focus group was conducted in

the morning after breakfast was served and introductions were made. Barnett (2005) states that “focus groups are often a good method of data generation if the question to be addressed involves gathering opinions and impressions from lay people or consumers” (p. 2). Kamberelis and Dimitriadis (2005) also say “focus groups decenter the authority of the researcher, providing women with safe spaces to talk about their own lives and struggles” (p. 893). We selected this method to allow the female pastors “to connect with each other collectively, share their own experiences, and ‘reclaim their humanity’ in a nurturing context” (Madriz, 2000, p. 843). Bond, Belenky, and Weinstock (2000) state that “high quality dialogue, individual and group narrative, and collaborative problem-solving were emphasized, in a feminist context affirming diversity, inclusiveness, strengths, social-contextual analyses, and social constructivist perspectives” (p. 697). Madriz also states that a focus group is able to create multiple lines of communication, and it can offer the participants a safe environment where they can share ideas, beliefs, and attitudes in the company of people from the same socioeconomic, ethnic, and gender backgrounds (p. 844). Forming focus groups for the female pastors who participated in the study, a safe place for them to narrate their stories, and to dialogue, was the means to give voice to female pastors. The dialogue in the focus groups from these female pastors sharing their experiences was enriched by one another.

It was anticipated that the focus groups would result in imagining and enacting the emancipatory political possibilities of collective work. Freire (1993/1970) believes that dialogue, fellowship, and solidarity are essential to human liberation and transformation:

We can legitimately say that in the process of oppression, someone oppresses someone else; we can not legitimately say that in the process of revolution, someone liberates someone else, nor yet that that someone liberates himself, but rather that men [women] in communion liberate each other. (p. 103)

Our focus groups enabled our participants to experience dialogue, fellowship and solidarity and to feel empowered and liberated by a collective group process.

The settings of the five groups were familiar to the participants. Creswell (2003) states that “qualitative research takes place in the natural setting... This enables the researcher to develop a level of detail about the individual or place and to be highly involved in actual experiences of the participants” (p. 181). Kamberelis and Dimitriadis (2005) state “most focus groups work within second-wave feminist qualitative inquiry has recognized the constitutive power of *space* and *place*” (p. 895). Madriz (2000) states “Using participants’ familiar spaces further diffuses the power of the researcher, decreasing the possibilities of ‘otherization’” (p. 841). In our research, three of five focus groups were conducted in three Taiwanese Presbyterian church settings which provided the participants familiarity and security. The other two of five focus groups were conducted in a hotel’s conference room which was located in the city where every participant lived. Having our focus groups in a hotel’s conference room also provided a more structured place for the meeting.

## Data Analysis

Bogdan and Biklen (1998) state “Analysis involves working with data, organizing them, breaking them in to manageable units, synthesizing, searching for patterns, discovering what is important and what is to be learned, and deciding what you will tell others” (p. 157). The data were collected from five groups verbatim and were transcribed in Taiwanese and Mandarin Chinese). Experiences of AFPs were compiled into 71 pages of extensive text. A detailed line-by-line coding and analysis of the transcribed data was conducted in order to generate themes from different patterns and categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). We identified and coded the repeated topics from five different groups to see the connections and the relationships in five sessions of the five groups. The goal of the data analysis was to identify the common themes that can represent and apprehend AFPs’ experiences of serving in leadership roles within the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan.

As Strauss and Corbin (1998) point out,

In doing our analyses, we conceptualize and classify events, acts, and outcomes. ... Doing line-by-line coding through which categories, their properties, and relationships emerge automatically takes us beyond description and puts us into a conceptual mode of analysis. (p. 66)

Strauss and Corbin suggest there are two levels when a researcher analyzes data. One level is the participants’ actual words. The other level is the researcher’s conceptualization of those words. The voices of the participants in this study were fully respected and represented in a form that preserved their own voices. The transcribed verbatim in the native language helped to preserve their voice and meaning. The emerging themes gave the research structure and meaning and made participants’ voices clear. An example of how we coded our data is presented as follows.

One participant shared her experience,

自從我月經開始來以後，我就討厭自己是一個女人...後來，在找教會的時候，又經驗了一些困難。有一間教會就因為我是女的而拒絕我的申請。從那次以後，我就更恨自己是一個女人。

*Since my menstruation started, I hate to be a woman... Later on, I experienced a hardship when trying to look for a church to serve. One church rejected me simply because they knew it was a woman applying to the available pastor position. Since then, I hate being a woman even more.*

This short paragraph was coded with three different colors that point out three different topics. The pink color pinpointed whenever the term “woman/women” appeared. The green color indicated how participants reason their experience, and the red color represented the emotions they had because of their experience.

## Trustworthiness

Harding and Hintikka (1983) addressed the following credibility issue: “What counts as knowledge must be grounded on experience. Human experience differs according to the kind of activities and social relations in which humans engage. Women’s experiences systematically differ from the experiences upon which knowledge claims have been grounded” (p. x). In the study, the experiences of Taiwanese female pastors were addressed and valued as they told their stories.

Gall, Gall, and Borg (2006) argued that the criterion of internal validity is not applicable to descriptive case study research because it does not seek to identify causal patterns. On the other hand, according to Johnson (1997), “[r]esearcher bias tends to result from selective observation and selective recording of information, and also from allowing one’s personal views and perspectives to affect how data are interpreted and how the research is conducted” (p. 160). In our study, there may, indeed, be researcher bias due to the fact that one of the researchers is an ordained minister of the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan. However, that researcher, with the others, has actively engaged in critical self-reflection about potential biases and predispositions. As a result, her effort has enhanced the type of validity that Johnson referred to as *reflexivity*.

According to Krefting (1991), triangulation, defined as cross-checking of data, sources and commentary, is one means to establish research credibility. Thus, prior to focus group sessions taking place, the main researcher distributed instruments to five Christian women who are knowledgeable in reading and understanding both English and Mandarin versions. Practical problems in phrasing the instrument were identified and revised accordingly based on feedback and suggestions.

Edmonson and Irby (2008) defined data triangulation as using multiple data sources, for example, interviews, observations, document types, or places. In this research, five focus groups were held in five different places under the same framework that fits Edmonson and Irby’s definition. Similarly, Gall et al. (2006) stated that triangulation is the process of using multiple data collection methods to check the validity of study findings. Therefore, after we collected and transcribed the data, the transcription was returned to the participants thus allowing them to double-check the data for accuracy in addition to providing them with another opportunity to offer any further feedback. According to Krefting (1991), this method, known as *member checking*, served to increase the trustworthiness of our study. In addition, by the researcher requesting feedback from the participants as well as including them in checking to confirming that the data accurately represented what they intended to say can increase research credibility, a process known as *interpretive validity*.

Through the research process, we realized that gender, belief in feminist counseling and feminist theology training and background not only influenced the research methods but also influenced every detail of how this research was accomplished, for example, writing the instruments, responding to participants in the focus groups and analyzing the data. Moreover, the main researcher’s gender perspective helped to conduct this research with deeper quality, and all of the researchers’ church background helped to relate better to the participants responses, aided the main researcher to facilitate group discussions and to build trust among the participants. As a result, the participants felt safer and

understood when their group facilitator shared her common experiences and background with them.

## Results

Six themes emerged after our line-by-line coding and analysis of the transcribed data: (a) style differences between Deborah's leadership and AFPs' leadership, (b) impact of society's stereotypes, (c) facing male pastors' fears, (d) dealing with the pressure of the singlehood, (e) women suppressing women, and (f) AFPs' goals— finding their own styles of leadership. These themes clearly express the participants' lived experience and meaning of being Asian Christian female pastors. Thick, rich quotations were included in the results section for further verification. We quoted in participants' languages, Taiwanese and Chinese (Mandarin), and then translated them to English for English readers. This procedure ensured authenticity of the data and improved the credibility of the study.

### Theme 1: Style Differences between Deborah's Leadership and AFPs' Leadership

The participants learned how Deborah, according to Judges 4, was respected and trusted by Israelites as a female prophet and judge, with others coming to her for guidance and suggestions. Following are some characteristics described by our participants related to Deborah's leadership: (a) Confidence: She listened to God and she knew God was at her side. She had confidence in what she said and did; (b) Courage to be different: Deborah did not play the roles that society asked women to play. She became a prophet and a judge. She led, she counseled, and she fought wars; and (c) Asserting herself as a female leader: Deborah sat under the palm tree so that people could come to seek her opinions publicly.

The participants shared how different they were from Deborah in terms of their leadership. One participant said,

我不擅長做決定，從小，我習慣服從權威角色的決定，即使現在我是牧師了，可以做決定了，我還是很害怕這個角色與位置。

*I am not used to making big decisions. I was brought up to follow authority's decisions. Now even though I am a pastor with certain authority to make decisions for the church, I am so scared to take this role.*

She continued to speak of her fear of being a leader,

當教會長老要我行使牧師權柄之時，我會很害怕自己會做的不夠好。

*When the elders in my church told me that I can assume more authority because I am their pastor, I realized my inner fear that I may not do things right or good enough.*

In contrast to Deborah's assertive and confident leadership, our participants talked about their struggles being female pastors in a leadership role and playing other

traditional roles such as that of a wife, a daughter-in-law, a mother. They felt sometimes these roles are contradictory to their role as pastors. One participant said,

我丈夫和我都是牧師。在我們的牧會生涯裡，我將自己定義為幫助丈夫牧會的助理角色。

*My husband and I are both pastors. In our ministry life, I first defined myself as an assistant and companion pastor to my husband's pastor role. The following quote demonstrates the mixed feelings that many Asian female pastors in their society constantly deal with.*

我對女牧師承接領導權感到很矛盾，如過我太堅持，人家會說我太能幹，相反地，如果我不夠能幹，人家友會認為我太軟弱，不足以擔當大任。

*I have mixed feelings as to how I assume my leadership as a female pastor. If I am assertive, I know some people would comment about me for being 'too tough.' On the other hand, if I am not tough enough, people would see me as too weak, not qualified enough to be a leader.*

Thus, Asian female pastors often feel like they are walking on egg shells. It is often hard for them to find the balance they need to play their roles well and to exhibit confidence.

## **Theme 2: Impact of Society's Stereotypes**

Society's failure to *accept* women as equal to men often negatively affects the female self-image (Steinem, 1992). One participant shared her experience,

自從我月經開始來以後，我就討厭自己是一個女人...後來，在找教會的時候，又經驗了一些困難。有一間教會就因為我是女的而拒絕我的申請。從那次以後，我就更恨自己是一個女人。

*Since my menstruation started, I hate to be a woman... Later on, I experienced a hardship when trying to look for a church to serve. One church rejected me simply because they knew it was a woman applying to the available pastor position. Since then, I hate being a woman even more.*

Another participant said that many times she received comments that women should not be in a pastor role.

女人做什麼可以比男人好？了不起就是結婚生小孩，博士唸完也是要結婚生小孩嘛！不然妳能做什麼？

*What can women accomplish better than men? Giving birth may be. Even though you have a Ph.D., you still need to get married and deliver children.*

She continued to say,

我現在在唸博士班啊!大家的心理有一個疑問就是,妳嫁了嗎?妳孩子誰在帶?妳孩子如果有狀況的話,馬上就會扣妳說就是因為讀博士,沒有在顧小孩啦!讀什麼博士嘛!

*I am in a Ph.D. program now. People ask me questions such as “Are you married? Who is taking care of your children?” and if my kids got sick, they would right away blame me for being in the Ph.D. program.*

Women often are blamed for neglecting their family when pursuing their careers. To a certain extent, women start to lose confidence in themselves.

A participant talked about the stereotype that people have concerning women who decide to apply to a seminary program. She said,

神學院入學考面試時,我被問的第一個問題是‘你是考進來準備做牧師娘的嗎?’聽起來好像女生唸神學院唯一的目的是找一個結婚的伴侶。我就告訴面試的教授們,我是來唸神學的。

*When I interviewed with the seminary faculty in order to enter the theology program to study, the very first question I was asked was “Are you trying to join this program and marry a pastor-to-be and become a pastor’s wife?” It sounded like the only purpose for a woman to study in the theology program is to look for a spouse. I told the faculty interviewer that I actually came to study theology for myself.*

Many female pastors struggle to establish their own identity. As the following example demonstrates:

常常會有人在第一次見到我的時候叫我牧師娘。即使我糾正他們,告訴他們我是牧師,有人還是繼續叫我牧師娘。

*Often, people addressed me as the pastor’s wife when they first met me. Even though I corrected them and told them that I am a pastor, still, some of them kept addressing me as ‘pastor’s wife.’*

Sexism is even displayed in an obvious way, as shared in the following statement,

在開中會時,有人會在台上發表性別歧視的言論說:‘大家注意,請漂亮的女同工去門口作招待。’



*In the presbyters' meeting, sometimes sexist announcements were made: "Attention, pretty female pastors go to the door and greet people, please."*

A participant stated,

女牧師要比一般的男牧師傑出才會被肯定為一個牧師

*Female pastors need to be twice as outstanding as male pastors before they (FP) are well recognized and validated.*

Even when female pastors' outstanding performance is recognized, still, they are prohibited from assuming more important positions because of their gender. More than once, participants received similar comments as follows:

我曾是一間大教會的副牧。當我們的主任牧師要退休時，教會需要找一個新的主任牧師。很多教會會友告訴我：‘可惜妳是女的，我們很喜歡妳做我們的主任牧師，但我們要找的是一個男性。

*I was once an assistant pastor in a big church. When the senior pastor retired, the church needed to find a replacement for his position. Many church members told me, "What a shame that you are a woman. We would like for you to be our senior pastor but we are looking for a man."*

### **Theme 3: Facing Male Pastors' Fear**

Another important topic mentioned in all five groups was male pastors' fear of their female colleagues. The following quotations illustrate their common experiences. One said,

在我的牧會將驗裡，我感覺到男性牧師對女牧師傑出表現的恐懼。他們對女牧師牧會牧的好倍感威脅。

*In my ministry journey, I sense many male pastors fear female pastors' outstanding performance. They feel threatened when there are female pastors who do excellent jobs in their ministries.*

Another participant said,

最近女傳有多一點的聚會，有一些男牧師就說這些女牧師在搞小團體來對抗他們男牧師。其實，女牧師在牧會時會遇到男牧師碰不到的困難，這種時候女牧師也不能跟男牧師講，所以，當女牧師聚集在一起時，可以成為彼此的支持。我們的動機是這麼單純卻被看得如此複雜。

*There have been activities held by the FP (female pastor) association recently. Some male pastors commented that FPs want to group together in order to be aligned against male pastors. Actually, FPs face different challenges in our ministry than male pastors. Many times FPs feel uncomfortable talking to male colleagues. When FPs gather together, we can support each other. Our motive is simple but is viewed as complicated/ conspiratorial.*

One participant even voiced her opinion about electing a female commissioner in her presbytery and was resented by her male colleagues for speaking up. She said,

在我所屬的中會，我常常告訴他們要選女中委，否則我們中會就會落後其他中會了。很多男牧師就很生氣我做這樣的提醒。

*In the Presbytery that I belong to, I often told them we need to elect a female commissioner; otherwise our Presbytery will fall behind other presbyteries. Many male pastors are angry at me because of what I said in the Presbytery.*

#### **Theme 4: Dealing with the Pressure of the Singlehood**

One challenge that Asian female pastors face is finding a balance between their marriage and their pastoral role or finding a way to deal with the pressure to get married if they are still single. One participant shared,

我還是單身。我注意到教會中長老認為這是一個缺點，代表我還不成熟。他們如果需要建議，會去找其他教會的男牧師，因為他們認為我還是一個小孩。

*I am still single. I noticed that the elders in my church consider this to be a deficit and a sign of immaturity. If they need advice in certain issues, they ask other male pastors because they consider me still a young kid.*

Another participant's experience is as follows: She said,

我非常尊敬的牧師前輩打電話給我，鼓勵我找一個對象，嫁一嫁。後來，我將這件事向另一位男同工提起，他也同意並且認為女傳還是不適合獨立牧養教會。

*One senior pastor I respected a lot called me and encouraged me to find a husband. He said that it is more important for me to get married than to be a pastor. Later on, I mentioned this to another male pastor. He agreed with that senior male pastor and thought female pastors are still not qualified enough to minister to a church independently.*

Another participant shared her struggle of being a single woman pastor. She said,

我仰慕底波拉的領導權。相反地，我覺得巴拉很窩囊。但是，我對自己身為單身女性領導者也不是很有自信。我最近的想法是，我在這一任內如果沒有結婚，我就要來走機構路線。我想如果我有一個伴侶跟我一起關心會更好。總覺得在牧會中有一個小缺憾是針對教會中較軟弱的弟兄。

*I admire Deborah's leadership. I despise Barak's cowardice. However, I am not very confident being a female leader and remaining single. I have been considering the option of giving up my ministry if I am still single when I finish this coming two years... I feel like I am not able to minister to men's spiritual needs enough; I wish I had a husband who could bridge this gap for me.*

Another participant shared her concerns about finding a position because of her marital status,

在結束婚姻剛不久，我正要找教會，所以很受爭議。我很害怕和憂慮我所申請的教會會因為我的離婚而拒絕我。我知道我的離婚一定會被討論，特別是面臨到封牧這個關卡。

*My marriage ended about the time I was looking for a church to serve. I was very worried and had tremendous fears that churches I applied to would consider my divorce a big deficit and would reject my application because of it. I knew my divorce would be discussed, especially since it took place almost at the same time of my ordination.*

### **Theme 5: Women Suppressing Women**

One topic that appeared repeatedly in the groups is the phenomenon of “women suppressing women.” Participants shared their experiences and they discussed why such a phenomenon existed. A female pastor first shared,

在我的教會，有一位長老娘常常會唸我。直到今天，我還是不知道為什麼。

*In my church, an elder's wife does not like me and nags me all the time. Until today, I still do not know why.*

After further discussion, a new realization came to this participant. She said,

也需是因為她較沒有自信。她需要有一個強悍的外表來掩蓋她的脆弱。

*Maybe it is her low self-esteem. She needs a tough appearance to cover her inner vulnerability.*

Another female pastor thought that women in her society were taught to admire men but not taught to appreciate other women who have different strengths other than the traditional role. She said,

女性的成長中不斷被教導要相信男人是比女人優秀的。我們很會欣賞男性的優點。但我們卻不會欣賞傑出的女性。我們認為如果我不是那麼好的女性，別的女性也不能比我好。

*Women are taught to believe that men are superior to and are better than women. We learned to admire and appreciate men's strengths; however, we do not know how to appreciate outstanding women's strengths, sometimes I think like a man, if I am not that outstanding as a woman, then all other women cannot be better than I am, therefore, we as women, are not seen as having what men have.*

This participant continued to say,

我們需要挑戰我們自己。我們也要學習欣賞彼此。台灣基督長老教會越來越多的女牧師了，我相信這絕對不是平白無故如此，一定是上帝的旨意。上帝要預備女傳作男傳所無法做到的事。所以女傳應該要團結，為將來替上帝做更大的事而準備。

*We need to challenge ourselves. We have to learn to appreciate each other. The PCT has more and more female pastors now. I believe this phenomenon does not change for no reason. God has His/Her will in this. God may be preparing these female pastors to do something that male pastors cannot do. Therefore, as female pastors, we need to connect and unify more in order to do bigger things in the future for God.*

One participant challenged the ratio of female commissioners in the presbytery. She said,

我們的中會女傳與男傳的比例有一比三。比台灣其他中會都高。但是我們卻只有一位女中委。這表示我們沒有團結也不會互相欣賞。

*The ratio of female pastors and male pastors in Chi-I presbytery is one to three. It is a highest one compared to other presbyteries in Taiwan. However, we only had one female commissioner in our presbytery. This*

*means as women pastors we do not unify enough to elect some good female commissioners among us.*

Another participant who is from an indigenous tribe shared her sadness,

在我們的中會已經有女性議長，然而，許多女牧師反而在後面說她的壞話。

*In our Presbytery, we already have a female moderator. However, many female pastors speak poorly of her behind her back.*

Several women recognized how important it is to support other women instead of suppressing them. One female pastor shared her awareness and the action that she has been taking,

自從我封牧後，我決定我要積極支持其他女牧師。只要有女同工封牧，我一定到，讓教會會友知道女性牧者不是少數。

*Since I became a pastor, I have decided to more actively support other female pastors. I think whenever there is a new female pastor being ordained, we have to attend her ordination in order to support this female colleague and to educate church members as well, to help them know that their female pastor is not a rare one.*

### **Theme 6: AFP's Goals— Finding their Own Styles of Leadership**

Through the group process, female pastors in Taiwan were encouraged to establish their own style of leadership by finding their own strengths and potentials. They said,

在領導權的討論裡，我領悟到要在對的環境裡發揮出我們的潛能。

*In the leadership discussion session, I discovered that good leadership is to find our potentials and to use them fully in the right environment;*

我不同意女人的能力比男人差，我認為女人需要活出上帝造我們時所給我們的長處與才能，並去完成上帝所交付於我們的使命。

*I do not agree that women are less competent than men are; however, I do think that we women need to live out the strengths and characters that God has created in us and to fulfill the mission that God assigns us;*

我認為認同我的女性特質，與上帝建立親密的關係可以幫助我有最棒的領導權。

*I think that to validate my feminine characteristics and to build a solid and intimate relationship with God is the key to assuming great leadership.*

Further, they advocated growing and developing their potential through statements such as,

女性要建立屬於自己的領導風格; 找到並展現出自己的長處與能力。

*Women need to form our own leadership styles. We find our strengths and abilities and carry them out;*

and

女性要發現能活出我們潛能的領域。如果我們在一個不適合的環境服事，我們便會常常覺得挫折。舉例來說，我現在牧養的教會是一個小教會，會友就很感謝我願意留在這裡，因為他們很難找到牧師願意長期留下來牧養這間教會。

*Women need to find our own territory which will allow us to live out our potentials. If we are in an unfit working environment, we will constantly feel frustrated. For example, the church I am serving now is a small church. They greatly appreciate me as their minister because it is hard for them as a small church to have a pastor willing to serve them for a long time.*

The participants described their desired leadership styles using such terms as humble, non-directive, communicative, diplomatic, exercising more initiative, and equal to men's leadership. Asian female pastors described the leadership styles they wanted to establish as follows:

我想要學習做一個較圓滑，適應良好，且幹練的領導者;

*I want to learn to be a well-adjusted, diplomatic, and polished leader;*

我認為女性領導特質的最佳例子是在當同工有衝突時居中協調。

*I think one example of feminine leadership is demonstrated when there is communication if there are conflicts between the colleagues.*

One participant specifically stated what she had learned about leadership through the Bible story and the commentary that we used in the group.

我現在認為女性有她獨特的領導權。譬如底波拉的領導權，以色列民尋求她的意見。我想學習底波拉得到眾人的敬重。人們自動自發來找她。我想我的領導風格不會是強勢指導的，它比較會是謙卑的和非指導性的。

*I now think women's leadership can be unique and special. For example, we learned about Deborah's leadership. The people of Israel would go to her for her decision. I want to learn to be more like Deborah and earn people's respect. People came to her willingly. My leadership would not be authoritative and directive, it would be humble and non-directive.*

Another participant made the following remarks related to finding her female style of leadership:

關於領導權，我認為有些人透過權力領導，有些以靈性領導，有些人就是跟著上帝的帶領去領導。我經常在想什麼是傳統的領導風格而什麼又是獨特的女性領導風格。我需要花一些時間去釐清。

*About leadership, I think that some lead through power, some lead spiritually, and some simply follows God's guidance. Many times, I wonder what the differences are between the traditional style of leadership and uniquely feminine way of leadership. I may need to take more time to figure it out.*

Although a few participants shared their struggles along the group process, several mentioned that through the experience they finally found their leadership direction as female pastors. They said,

在讀底波拉的領導權時，我的內在產生一些抗拒。我以前認為女性的領導應該在男性之後。但我見到底波拉只是非常忠於扮演上帝差派給她的角色，也就是去領導男人。

*In reading about Deborah's leadership, I noticed some resistance in me. I always thought that the female's leadership should be behind (second to) the male's leadership. In our discussions, I see that Deborah was loyal to the role that God assigned her, which was to lead men,*

and

在牧會上，我以前定義自己為一個助手。但在讀了底波拉的故事之後，我要學習像底波拉一樣勇敢，也要更積極一些，像她坐在棕樹下給來尋求的人意見。

*I used to identify myself as a helper and assistant in my ministry. After reading Deborah's story, the commentary, and from going through the discussions, I want to learn to be braver and take more initiatives like Deborah did when she sat under a palm tree and gave advice to people who came for her decisions.*

One participant wrote a prayer related to finding her own leadership. She prayed,

上帝，求祢幫助我成為一個有底波拉領導權的女牧師...幫助我使用我的女性特質來牧養那些軟弱的。

*God, help me be a female pastor who leads like Deborah.... Help me use my feminine characteristics and strengths to minister to those who are weak.*

A female pastor spoke for many other women pastors with a very strong statement,

即使台南是台灣沙豬主義的大本營，我相信我依然可以走出一條堅定的女傳之路。

*Even though Tainan City is the base (center) of chauvinism in Taiwan, I believe that I still can participate in a solid female pastor's journey.*

### **Limitations**

One biblical story, Deborah's leadership, related to AFPs was selected for the study. This was done in an effort to motivate participants to share their own experiences. Despite the fact that only one story was used in this session, the primary focus of this study was to determine how traditional patriarchal church culture and theology affect the Asian female pastors' leadership roles in the Church. The passages taken from the Bible served as a tool to help Asian female pastors address issues relative to their leadership in the church.

### **Conclusion and Summary**

Our research provided voice to Asian female pastors (AFPs) as they shared their challenges experienced in the Taiwanese Presbyterian Church and as they related those challenges to the experiences in the biblical story of Deborah in Judges 4 and 5. The participants were encouraged by Deborah's story and shared how different or similar their leadership was from Deborah's. The discussions led the AFPs to consider changes in themselves and in the church system. For example, they wanted to unify and support each other more than they had in the past. They also planned to enhance the political influence in the presbytery and General Assembly. At the same time, the women discovered the importance of working on validation from within themselves since they are facing a society which often does not validate their leadership. As one of the participants said,

我所服事的教會已經有 130 年的歷史，我是這間教會的第一位女牧師。如果上帝呼召我成為女牧師，誰敢說我不行？



*The church I am ministering to now has been established for 130 years. I am the first female pastor in this church history. God calls me to be a pastor; who can deny me?*

In Theme 1 to Theme 5, AFPs' experiences are described. In Theme 6, our participants expressed what they had learned during the process and what they had learned from each other. They came to the conclusion after the sessions, that they now are more certain and confident to serve God by using their unique leadership styles in the Church system. Even though the system is still patriarchal, the AFPs, as female leaders, have hope that they can make changes by being present and making their voices heard.

If people view their God as only a male God and as a God contra toward women, their daily lives may be a reflection of such views (Lin, 2003). Harris (1989) points out that viewing God's image as a male is devastating in many ways because:

They go to the core of what it is to be human and in the image of God, are the religious lies we have been taught: That god is male, and so men just understand him (him?) better than women do. That if we need advice in our spiritual lives we must seek it from a priest or rabbi, rather than a mother or a friend. Those women are not worthy to serve at the altar of God, even to touch it. That anything having to do with our sexuality is suspect, and that if we are menstruating it is best that we stay out of the temple altogether. That the first rule in spirituality is to deny ourselves. (p. 18)

On the other hand, if such an ideology and system can be challenged and overturned, new beliefs might be reflected and lives changed, and, in the case of our participants, female pastors could then be respected, accepted, and appreciated. As Fiorenza (1992) says: "Meaning is always politically constructed insofar as interpretation is located in social networks of power/knowledge relations that shape society" (p. 3).

If the AFPs could construct a meaningful social network, they could not only enhance their self-esteem, but they also could contribute to their church in a more viable way using their capabilities and talents. Asian female pastors shared very similar stories and struggles through their years of service. This is as a reminder that making changes in a society is a long, gradual, and arduous process. Notwithstanding, the number of AFPs is continuously increasing. The increased number of AFPs and their contributions may help churches decrease their stereotypes of AFPs. For example, at one participant's ordination ceremony, approximately 80 AFPs attended that service and sang together in front of the congregation. The large number of AFPs shocked many in attendance. People commented, "We didn't know there are so many female pastors now." Times have changed since the female leader, Deborah, stood on the stage of history. Yet the ancient story of Deborah, along with modern day AFPs' experiences, can provide a foundation to the reconstruction of traditional patriarchal theological thought and to the duplication of many *Deborah's* to come.

Such a process of using feminist revised stories from the Bible with specific topical relationships such as leadership from the Deborah story appears to have been successful in providing reflection and strength for Asian female pastors. Additional

topical stories which might be used that would relate to female pastors and that might assist in their being able to better position themselves within the patriarchal church system might be (a) Ruth and financial independence, (b) Esther and self-control, or (c) Mary and Martha and personal relationships with other women.

Our recommendations for future research are to use other stories of women in the Bible to address the issues related to Asian female pastors' leadership. If different stories are chosen from the Bible, the gender-sensitive commentaries need to be written from different perspectives to address related issues that AFPs have faced within the context of the Church.

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### **Article Citation**

Lin, Y-F., Li, C., Irby, B. J., & Brown, G. (2010). Exploring Asian female pastors' leadership roles in the church: Using Deborah's story. *The Qualitative Report*, 15(6), 1431-1458. Retrieved from <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR15-6/lin.pdf>

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