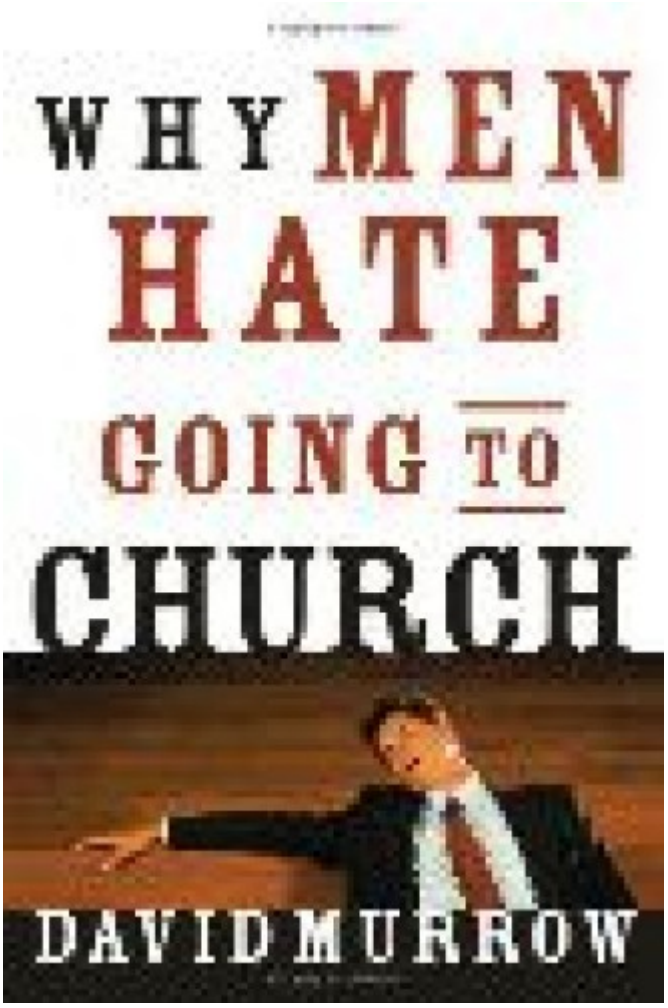
# Missing men

By Lillian Daniel in the April 3, 2007 issue

## In Review




### Why Men Hate Going to Church

David Murrow
Nelson

Where are the men on Sunday morning? The men are out seeking adventure, risk and challenge, while the women rule the pews within a dull but safe feminized

church. So argues David Murrow, director of Church for Men, an organization aimed at “restoring a healthy masculine spirit in Christian congregations.”

What of 2,000 years of male dominance in church leadership, from the first disciples to today’s clergy? Murrow likens the situation to a cake. “One day my wife baked a chocolate cake and set it on the counter with a note next to it: ‘Dig In!’ Chocolate and I have a special relationship, so I quickly grabbed a knife and cut into the rich brown frosting. To my horror, I found a white cake lurking beneath. The church is like that cake. It looks male dominated on the surface, but inside it’s feminine in every way.”

So what makes a church feminine? Murrow’s answer comes from gender stereotypes as old as the hills, but freshly attuned to the pop culture of our day, with boring vanilla representing the feminine and high-octane caffeinated chocolate characterizing the men.

Using another image—that of the thermostat—Murrow claims that men like it hot. If the church wants to attract them, it needs to turn up the heat, just like in the movies. “Films reflect our fantasies,” he explains. “Men fantasize about saving the world against impossible odds. Women fantasize about having a relationship with a wonderful man.” Murrow worries that a female-dominated church has turned Jesus into that wonderful man who appeals only to the ladies. A chick-flick atmosphere prevails on Sunday mornings, complete with flowers, ferns and soft music, all geared toward women’s desires for safety, security and harmonious relationships.

Murrow’s concern about the preponderance of females in church (more than 60 percent in the typical congregation, he says) is nothing new. He is indebted to his contemporaries who have described the “feminization of Christianity,” such as Leon Podles in *The Church Impotent* (“Modern churches are women’s clubs with a few male officers”) and John Eldredge, author of *Wild at Heart* (“I think most men in the church believe God put them on earth to be good boys”). But he also stands in a long line of men, going back centuries, who have worried that it’s mostly women who go to church and that Jesus just isn’t beefy enough for a red meat–eating man. (Episcopal rector Frederic Dan Huntington wrote in 1856 that the church is “composed chiefly of females and aged men.”)

According to Murrow’s worldview, women are as comfortable at church activities as they could possibly be, while their undercherished manly husbands are waiting in

the car during coffee hour and fiddling with the radio dial. The church provides a list of jobs that no real man would want to do, while the women delight in roles such as nursery care provider, prayer minister, baker and teacher.

As for the men who would actually take such jobs and participate in church activities, Murrow dismisses them as feminine themselves. In his view, women have constructed a church in their own froufrou image, a place of passivity where women thrive but men wilt.

Murrow describes the ecstasy of the estrogen- enhanced churchgoer: “Her brain comprehends and appreciates everything that is happening. She easily processes information as it is dispensed from the pulpit. Her hormones help her to react in every situation. She flutters through the church like a butterfly—he crawls around like a slug.” Why is this? Get ready for Murrow’s whistle-stop tour of biology, brain difference, psychology and anthropology, with headings such as “Masculinity: Key to Survival of the Human Race” and “Men Were the Hunters, Women the Gatherers.”

Not afraid to wade around in the murky waters of the psychology of sex differences, Murrow makes his point using generalities that are far from subtle—and not widely agreed upon—to support his call for a different kind of church, the kind that offers the excitement of movie clips and raucous music. “Brain differences play out in the entertainment men and women choose. Women buy romance novels; men buy pornographic magazines. She’s stimulated by words; he’s stimulated by images.”

Apparently, the average church service is just too wordy for the average guy, who is longing for the visual stimulation he gets at action movies. “Women speak 20,000 to 25,000 words a day, while a typical man speaks just 7,000 to 10,000. Women love to talk. If you doubt this, hang around after the church service.”

Nonetheless, Murrow does seem to have something to say, as do the men who resonate with his message. If you carry this book around with you for a few weeks, you will hear from men who resonate with the book’s title and who, contrary to its thesis, aren’t afraid to share their feelings. A church with more testosterone sounds like fun to them, and most women have a story about a man who won’t go to church because it’s boring.

Of course, we all know men and women who defy the stereotypes that Murrow relies on. But clearly he is speaking to somebody, and whether he reflects the needs of a small or a large group of men, the church can learn something by listening. His

critique of churches as places of safety and harmony, for instance, is one that has been made by both male and female reformers of all stripes throughout Christian history. His use of the acronym B.O.R.E.D. nicely describes people who avoid church because they are indeed turned off by a culture of “busyness, obligation, ritual, education and duty.”

Murrow is right to point out that when our top prayer request is “God, keep us safe. Keep our kids safe. Watch over us and protect us,” we are not being faithful to the fullness of the gospel and the cost of discipleship. It’s just that women could raise these criticisms of a milquetoast church too. In Murrow’s world it’s only the men who are slighted when the church becomes too safe.

In his critique of worship, Murrow does not reserve his barbs for the old-time hymns. He thinks much of the praise and worship music of the megachurches, which passes for contemporary, is too soft and romantic to appeal to men—and so are the lyrics. If your worship music implies that Jesus is your boyfriend, don’t be surprised when more women than men show up for church, no matter how “mega” the event may be.

African-American churches report the highest proportion of women in the pews, black Muslims the highest percentage of men. Twenty-six percent of Catholic men attend mass, compared to 49 percent of Catholic women. Older churches report a larger gender gap than do new ones.

A bias running through Murrow’s book is the conviction that large churches that are focused on saving souls do the best job of ministering to men. Rick Warren, who is often quoted as a champion of risk and growth, is the model pastor. The older and smaller churches are portrayed as being asleep on the job.

Missing is a more nuanced look at all the people who are absent from church, including the women who stay home on a Sunday morning. The gender gap, described with such alarm by Murrow, is just one piece of a puzzle that involves seismic shifts in the American religious landscape. Most significantly, we have moved from being people who were born into their religious traditions to people who choose their traditions, who freely admit that they shop for a church.

In addition, while there is a churchly gender gap, there are also considerable numbers of men who attend churches that Murrow contends do not meet their needs. Why are they there, in this culture of church choice, and in such numbers?

Why don’t they all flock to churches that match Murrow’s model, offering excitement, film clips and loud music?

In other words, there must be something to account for the presence in churches of all those Presbyterian men. They can’t all be pantywaists dragged to church by sanctimonious wives, enduring torturous boredom over the years, silently sobbing into their pillows on a Sunday night, “My pastor just doesn’t understand me.”

To put it plainly, there is clearly a large and statistically significant presence of men at the very churches that Murrow says they should hate. Could it be that men are not all the same? And for that matter, women as well? Do we need a variety of worship styles not because men are different from women, but because we are all unique and different from one another?

Don’t look for an answer from Christian comedian Brad Stine, one of the organizers of GodMen, a worship movement that he created after reading Murrow’s book. And don’t look for nuance in the tone of much of the secular news coverage of such events. In an article tellingly titled “Real Men Talk About God: A New Christian Movement Lets Guys Be Guys,” *Newsweek* writer Eileen Finan describes a Saturday morning this past October when 200 Christian men gathered in a warehouse in downtown Nashville for a masculine spiritual extravaganza. The message of the movement, as well as the coverage of it: there is one way to be masculine, and this is it.

What made the GodMen event masculine? Finan writes: “Inside, strobe lights flashed, and tracks by the Killers thumped from speakers stacked on either side of a stage. Four large video screens showed clips of karate fights, car chases and ‘Jackass’-style stunts. Then the music lowered and Christian comedian Brad Stine appeared. With his rat-a-tat delivery and aggressive style, Stine quickly whipped the crowd into a chorus of ‘Amens!’ ‘A lot of guys out there wouldn’t have the balls to be here,’ he shouted. ‘Are you ready to be a man? Are you ready to kick ass? Are you ready to grab your sword and say, “OK, family, I’m going to lead you”? Buckle up. This is GodMen!’”

The GodMen gathering enforced three rules. First, no women were allowed, so that the men could be free to be men. Second, no one under 17 was admitted. This was to allow for frank discussions of sex—conversations that Stine says men long to have in church settings. GodMen addressed this topic with a forum called “Training the

Penis.” Former pastor Nate Larkin described picking up his first prostitute on the way to preach at a candlelight service on Christmas Eve, and talked about his struggle to overcome sexual addiction.

Said one attendee: “People think that you have to be a goody-two-shoes to be Christian, and I hate that. This has strengthened me. I am a man and I can stand my ground and I’m not afraid to show my impurities and if someone has a problem with that, that’s their problem.”

To emphasize the point, GodMen replaced the “Jesus is my boyfriend” praise music with a band that instead sang “Testosterone High”: “Forget the ying and the yang / I’ll take the boom and the bang / Give me another dose of testosterone.”

In keeping with Murrow’s advice to keep men visually stimulated, the words “Boss, Bold, Brash, Bully, Blunt” flashed across screens during the event. Said one attendee, “If 200 men are feeling this, other men are feeling it too.”

But are they? Does a meeting of 200 men in a warehouse a trend make? Does a book like Murrow’s speak to all men or just to a few? And if there is a trend, is it the one Murrow identifies—the feminization of the church? Or is the newest trend one of *complaining* about the feminization of the church?

The third rule of the GodMen event was that pastors were not to be included among the speakers. The rationale was that clergy would not be free to speak their minds for fear that the feminized church would beat them down for revealing their manliness. After all, ordained pastors might not be able to let their hair down and really rock out to GodMen songs like “Grow a Pair!” where the band sang: “We’ve been beaten down / Feminized by the culture crowd / No more nice guy, timid and ashamed / We’ve had enough, cowboy up / In the power of Jesus’ name / Welcome to the battle / A million men have got your back / Jump up in the saddle / Grab a sword, don’t be scared / Be a man, grow a pair!”

GodMen reserved the speaking roles for nonpastors so that the ballsy truth could be told (an apparent exception was made for that ex-pastor who dallied with the prostitutes and was willing to talk about it—not to be confused with sharing, which is something that women do).

Running throughout Murrow’s book and the movement is a critique of clergy (presumed to be male). What have they done to deserve such ostracism by real

men? Why, they are too girly, of course. According to Murrow, many male ministers throughout history have capitulated to the passive leadership style of women, becoming “a special class of men who were allowed to exercise feminine gifts. Pastors moved in feminine circles; preaching to women, drinking tea and eating cakes with women. . . . Victorian women adored these effeminate, sensitive, caring men, but their husbands were not impressed.”

From then on, pastors alienated men by working with women “against male pleasures such as drinking, gambling, cursing, and whoring,” which led to the current predicament in which “men have had the pulpit; women have had the pews.” The entrance of more women into the field of ministry bodes ill for Murrow, who worries that “if current trends continue, women will eventually dominate the clergy, just as they have every other aspect of church life in America.”

But perhaps the real fear is that these clergy would intelligently respond to statements like “The stallions hang out in bars; the geldings hang out in church”—not out of a knee-jerk political correctness but by quoting a real man like Paul, who said that in Christ there is neither male nor female. Perhaps clergy of both genders would raise theological questions about the image of God that would make it harder to stereotype men and women so easily. Perhaps clergy, educated in the history of Christianity, would speak honestly about how the church has treated women over the centuries, and remind GodMen that their “reformer’s zeal” against the feminization of the church is nothing new.

The church has always been attacked as being too weak or too feminine when it has challenged a culture of the market or of violence. There is also nothing new about the critics of the church’s so-called weakness gathering together in all-male groups to complain about it (again, not to be confused with sharing).

The latest trend in gathering such men and getting them fired up about the feminization of the church is yet another wave, albeit with strobe lights, more explicit lyrics and high-thermostat video action. But can a warehouse gathering of like-minded men that excludes women and children really be the church? Or do we need to sit side by side regardless of our differences and struggle to be the body of Christ together?

Murrow wants men back in church, but he wants women to change first. “Women must humble themselves, pray and allow the men of the church to lead the body

toward an adventure. . . . Will you allow men to take risks, dream big, and push the envelope within your local church? God made men for adventure, achievement and challenge, and if they can't find those things in church, they're going to find them somewhere else." In other words, they'll find those things either in a warehouse with 200 other men or—and here's the implicit threat—with a prostitute on Christmas Eve.

This is the kind of model for change in the church that a four-year-old would come up with: if you don't play by my rules, I'm picking up my marbles and going home. Yet clearly that is what a large number of men have done. They have voted by their absence, and the church ignores that exodus at its peril.

At its best, the church listens to threats and critiques without compromising its core principles; it changes for the better without opting to offer whatever sells. At its worst, the church responds to such threats by giving in and becoming whatever the petulant child demands, responding to cultural pulls like a for-profit entertainment industry pushing yet another sexy action hero.

In a revealing metaphor drawing on filmmaking, Murrow tries to adjust the church's Sunday morning thermostat to the level that he and his buddies enjoy on a Saturday night at the movies. "Every filmmaker has a thermostat that is set for a certain kind of audience," he explains. "If a filmmaker is trying to attract a male audience, he will pack his movie with the things men like: buildings exploding, cars crashing, guns blazing and bodies flying. There will be tension, intrigue and a hero who saves the world against impossible odds."

But here's the rub. Our hero, Jesus, preached a message that was the antithesis of "buildings exploding, cars crashing, guns blazing and bodies flying." He also resisted stereotypes of men and women, as did the early church, pushing at an unlikely moment in history for a world in which we simply get to be children of God.

Certainly there have been moments of reform when laity have brought the church back to the vernacular, and called for worship and practice to be more grounded in the lives of ordinary people. When one group dominates another in the church, a corrective push can be a blessing, even the beginning of a reformation. But 200 men in a warehouse rocking to "Grow a Pair" may not be its finest moment.

Historically, when Christians have taken a stand involving risk, their toughest challenge has been to struggle against the cultural corruption of the church—surely

the opposite of making the church more palatable to a B-movie culture. The implied message of Murrow's book is that there is one way of being a man of God—and as for the girly men who don't join the party, they're just wimps who carry their wives' purses to a church where they don't want to be. It's an argument that insults the women of the church far less than it does the men. Surely there are ways of being a godly man that do not involve kicking ass. The cross stands out as one.