

## Case Study

### Gender Equity: Developing the Sustainable Rhythms Necessary to Reflect the Gifts and Diversity of a Global Network.

#### CONTEXT

Nearly two years ago Street Psalms was given a gift as an organization. The gift was the feminine voice speaking truth to our organization made up of mostly men. As the reality set in and we were reminded that this was not the first or the second or third time we missed it, we knew that something as vital as gender equity could no longer be ignored. While the room was filled with seasoned community development leaders from all over the world, there were only three women present.

That moment was the beginning of seriously asking ourselves and our organization some tough questions. We had to acknowledge that our default vision and the answer to almost any question was male. We leaned into this uncomfortable reality, elevating a vision of a more equitable future, and began making the necessary changes to pursue that future. The first step was to generate a question large enough to invite the whole of the organization into its pursuit.

#### OUR MISSIONAL QUESTION

How does Street Psalms (board, staff, senior fellows) reflect the gifts and diversity of the cities we serve, with a specific focus on gender equity throughout the network?

#### DISCUSSION

Our missional question came as a response to a significant watershed moment at the 2017 Street Psalms Institute in Grand Rapids. It became painfully obvious that while Street Psalms is committed to a theology that embraces those who are at the margins, the voice of women was obviously and painfully under-represented in our own leadership. This was occurring within a larger context of cultural challenges women face, including being less likely to be considered for leadership roles, the absence of mentoring and models, and a lack of opportunities to bring their voices to community transformation, specifically in the organization of Street Psalms.

As a result, Street Psalms committed itself to a thorough process of developing the organization to better reflect the communities we serve, with a specific focus on gender equity. In FY2019 we began to face these challenges, confronting organizational, cultural, theological, and personal barriers that had prevented Street Psalms from including women more fully in its work. Mitigating that bias in an intentional, strategic, and coura-

geous way is even harder work.

### HOW DID STREET PSALMS CREATE A SUSTAINABLE CONVERSATION?

As an organization, Street Psalms participated in its own Urban Peacemaker Fellowship (UPF), in which leaders were gathered for generative dialogue around a missional question, initiating creative incarnational action in response to a specific Missional Question. The UPF cohort was led by a woman and made up of Street Psalms Staff and board members to ensure the structural elements of the organization were part of the dialogue and collective action.

The cohort began with a conversation facilitated by Rebecca Perrault ([WATCH](#)), an expert in diversity & inclusion. This led to a conversation about the barriers that keep Street Psalms from fully reflecting the diversity of the communities we serve.

### ADDRESSING BARRIERS TO EQUITY

The Street Psalms staff worked to shape conversations around gender equity and the barriers that exist in three spheres:

1. Within our organization
2. Within our theology
3. Within ourselves (the personal ability/capacity to see and understand what women face as inequity).

Our design process was intuitive, fluid, and intentional. Our commitment to an asset-based approach prevented this from simply being a “problem-solving” exercise. Our process included:

**ANALYSIS:** We began with the recognition that we had a gap in leadership – particularly the absence of women’s voices and partnership – and explored the impact.

**DEFINING THE NEED:** To bring about change, we discussed the types of barriers that were preventing the creation of a more equitable space for women in leadership.

**METHOD:** Webinars were used to facilitate our process.

**DESIGN:** Several women, with lived experience in leadership transformation, designed webinar discussions that focused on barriers to gender equity, incorporating time for questions and reflection.

**DELIVERY:** 3 webinars

Theological Barriers/Opportunities ([WATCH](#))

Cultural Barriers/Opportunities ([WATCH](#))

Personal & Organizational Barriers/Opportunities (**WATCH**)

**EVALUATION:** Senior Fellows who participated in the webinars completed questionnaires to gather feedback.

### DEFINING THE NEED

It is easy to say we “need” gender equity. It is harder to realize why it is not currently our norm, or to understand the systemic ways in which we have adopted an image of the “default male” in our heads. So yes, we need gender equity, but our deeper need is for a new way of seeing—a new image of God that includes the full expression of God’s self and our human experience.

This is no small shift. When we open ourselves up to this kind of question it is easy to get overwhelmed. So while we focused on gender equity at every level of the organization, we also framed the discussion to ensure that our conversation and collective action would also remind us of our capacity as an organization to sit in these spaces and create the room for big questions.

### COLLECTIVE ACTION

As a result of the Gender Equity UPF, Street Psalms has initiated a plan to help orient our vision towards gender equity. It is also designed as a tool to hold ourselves accountable to achieving this mission through a more holistic representation of the network it serves. We addressed gender equity at the structural and leadership level of the organization, focusing on the board, staff, and senior fellows.

In discerning the collective action that would emerge from our missional question, we recognized that creating “gender equity” is not a project with a timeline. It requires shifting and transforming our organizational culture. We didn’t commit to quotas, but to following the leadership of the Spirit, and to the process of identifying, cultivating, and making intentional space for women to lead at all levels of our organization. The goal is a hospitable, lifegiving culture for diverse leaders to serve together.

The following actions were informed by the Gender Equity UPF in FY2019.

**TRAINING HUBS:** Hub evaluation now includes equity in leadership.

**SENIOR FELLOWS:** The Senior Fellow role was evaluated and reviewed, and they collectively agreed to add at least 1 women from network in FY2020.

**TRAINING MATERIALS:** All training (designed and delivered) is accountable to reflecting the diversity of the communities we serve, with special focus on gender equity.

**BOARD OF DIRECTORS:** Rev. Kristy Farber was named as board chair. 3 of 8 board members are now women.

**ADVISORY COUNCIL:** Three women were added to the Advisory Council. 5 of 12 advisory members are women.

**SENIOR MANAGEMENT:** Two women were added to the Senior Management Team. 2 of 5 are now women.

## KEYS TO SUCCESS

First and foremost, Street Psalms is committed at all levels to seeing the organization represent the communities it serves. This includes building a culture of inclusion not only in our organizational structure but also throughout our training, in both design and delivery.

Because we are a global community, webinars provided a shared space for these conversations. To form a shared language, the webinars provided our network with the shared experience of listening to and being led by the voices of women in discussions about organizational leadership, theological development, and cultural barriers to equity.

**LEADERSHIP GOALS:** The management team will prioritize the selection and invitation of women to become Senior Fellows with recommendations and input from Senior Fellow network.

**SUSTAINED FOCUS:** The Board, Staff and Senior Fellows have expressed the need to integrate gender equity discussion as an ongoing part of organizational development. We are developing a working philosophy and theology about gender equity that will become part of our organizational DNA. We must commit to constant reflection on our practices, policies, and shared ownership of a culture that embraces gender equity.

**CAPACITY-BUILDING:** We will continue to convene regular conversations to provide support our capacity to hold tension, specifically the tension of what we are becoming as a community. This is a constant challenge, to have a vision for what we want for ourselves, while extending grace in a process wrought with potential to hurt each other.

**CORE DOCUMENTS & JOB DESCRIPTIONS:** We will review organizational language to ensure it is consistent with our commitment to gender equity in all of our core documents and job descriptions.

**BALANCING ORGANIZATIONAL PRIORITIES:** We will prioritize this issue alongside the

other initiatives being developed by Street Psalms (Training Hubs, Preaching Peace).

## HOW DOES THIS PROCESS TRANSLATE INTO THE VARIETY OF CONTEXTS IN WHICH OUR GLOBAL NETWORK SERVES?

This movement, from addressing concerns at the organizational level to actual changes in the network, requires more than good will. It requires a common framework to engage the conversation. Fortunately the members of the Urban Training Collaborative have all agreed to the Incarnational Framework to guide our organizations and our training.

## INCARNATIONAL MOVEMENTS

Street Psalms engages a global network, embracing a broad range of missional work. Across contexts, there are four movements that we recognize as important shifts in the life of an incarnational community: from Scarcity to Abundance, from Theory to Practice, from Rivalry to Peacemaking, and from Fear to Freedom.



### FROM SCARCITY TO ABUNDANCE

*Abundance requires us to believe that there is enough. We see the city as a sacred place for all people, filled with the resources necessary for lasting peace.*

The Gender Equity UPF will require an investment of finances and time in order to achieve the kind of outcomes we want to see; namely, the recognition of inclusion of women in key areas of leadership at every level of the organization. We are learning to leverage the resources that are currently invested in other initiatives, and pursuing our desired outcomes for gender equity in strategic ways through new programming that can better utilize our assets.



### FROM RIVALRY TO PEACEMAKING

*Peacemaking requires a posture of engagement in which enemies are seen as friends who are necessary for Shalom.*

The desire to see gender equity achieved in the Street Psalms organization is a perfect test for the idea of moving from rivalry to peacemaking. Because power in this organization is situated currently with white male leaders, unfortunate norms are fostered and perpetuated. Seeking true gender equity in Street Psalms is in itself a move to resist the kind of rivalry that is deeply entrenched in our theological and cultural experiences as it relates to women in Christian leadership.



### FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE

*Emphasizing action means working in the real world of relationships, where vulnerability, risk, and failure are part of becoming fully human.*

There is no shortcut to transformation. Transformation takes time—time that is invested in people. Gender biases are deeply entrenched in our culture, theology, workplaces, families, and communities. Deconstructing these biases in order to make room for new ways of being human requires authentic relationships with those who have been “othered”; in this case, women. Authentic relationships are difficult when there is such an entrenched power dynamic – men with power, women without. Moving from theory to practice means finding a new way of “holding, sharing, and even giving away power.”



### FROM FEAR TO FREEDOM

*Being formed by the message, method, and manner of Jesus’ mission frees the messenger to love their city into greatness. Leaders who undergo the Incarnation are set free to do things they once thought impossible.*

The global society promotes the belief that power is a scarce resource, found primarily in those who are white and male. The incarnation flies in the face of this patriarchal and white supremacist view of power. It is a challenge to learn how to “die” to this addiction to power. How does Street Psalms as an organization of mostly male leaders identify opportunities to lay down privilege and power, and create welcoming spaces and opportunities for women?