

## EXCERPT



### ***Together in Ministry*** ***Women and Men in Flourishing Partnerships***

September 28, 2021 | \$22, 176 pages, paperback | 978-1-5140-0070-0

**Rob Dixon** (DIS, Fuller Theological Seminary) is an associate regional ministry director with InterVarsity Christian Fellowship/USA and senior fellow for gender partnership with the InterVarsity Institute. He is an adjunct professor at Fresno Pacific University and Fuller Theological Seminary and provides training on flourishing mixed-gender ministry partnerships for numerous organizations around the country.

## The Billy Graham Rule's Unintended Consequences

In October of 1948, Billy Graham's ministry was just getting rolling. His rallies were starting to draw big crowds and his fame was spreading. In light of his newfound celebrity, and with an eye toward the various forces that could potentially trip up his ministry, Graham and his inner circle met in a hotel room in Modesto, California, during a series of evangelistic gatherings. There, over the course of an afternoon, they established a set of rules that would govern their ministry work, a list that came to be known as the "Modesto Manifesto."

In the end, they articulated four different rules. They covenanted together to pursue scrupulous financial accountability, regular partnership with local church communities, and integrity in their publicity and reporting. Each of these rules were important to Graham and his cohort, but the fourth rule is the one that has become enshrined in churches around the world. Today this rule bears the moniker of "the Billy Graham Rule." It states that male leaders should never be alone with women who are not their wives.

Back in Modesto, the thinking was that if Billy Graham could be systematically separated from women, he would be protected from a devastating moral lapse, and no one could make a false accusation of impropriety on Graham's part. Graham himself wrote, "We all knew of evangelists who had fallen into immorality while separated from their families by travel. We pledged among ourselves to avoid any situation that would have even the appearance of compromise or suspicion. From that day on, I did not travel, meet, or eat alone with a woman other than my wife."

Over the years the Billy Graham Rule has become widely influential. Because of the Billy Graham Rule, pastors have spent decades driving separate cars to lunches and installing glass windows in their office doors, among other applications. Halee Gray Scott has conducted research regarding the Graham Rule, and she notes that "most of the men reported feeling the tension of living with integrity in a hypersexualized world. In following the Billy Graham Rule, they didn't intend to exclude women or sexualize them. Instead, they wanted to ensure their actions were always above board. They also wanted to inoculate themselves against false sexual harassment allegations." Truly, for generations of leaders, the Billy Graham Rule has essentially become the Eleventh Commandment, a must-follow for every male ministry leader who aspires to have a fruitful ministry that is above proverbial reproach.

But there is a problem here. Because for all the attention and energy given to the Billy Graham Rule, it hasn't proven to be a fail-safe answer to the sexual tensions embedded in the context of mixed-gender ministry partnerships. While Graham himself dodged even a hint of scandal in his decades of public life, chances are that every person reading this book knows the story of some male leader who has transgressed their personal boundaries and fallen into sin, and stories like that emerged in my study as well.

And yet it goes beyond that, because the Billy Graham Rule was also critiqued in my research as having several unintended negative consequences—stumbling blocks for women and men who would aspire to build flourishing mixed-gender ministry partnerships. So not only has Graham's rule failed to resolve the problem it was designed to address, it has also become an impediment to fully flourishing mixed-gender ministry partnerships.

My research revealed three examples of unintended consequences provoked by the Billy Graham Rule. First, a rigid adherence to the Billy Graham Rule can make it impossible for people to do their jobs. One interviewee, reflecting on her role as a supervisor tasked with developing male leaders, concluded that "I can't do my job if I can't be alone with a man." Systematically

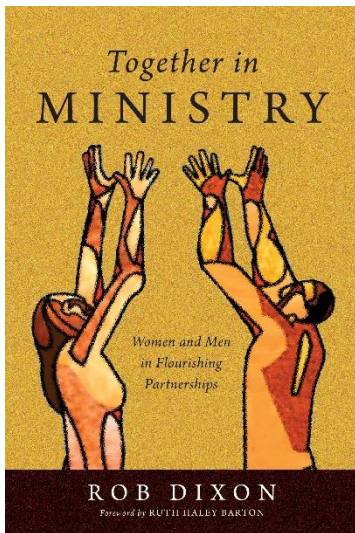


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prohibiting leaders from being physically present with their followers can limit their capacity to fulfill their ministry duties.

A second consequence of a blanket acceptance of the Billy Graham Rule is that it can perpetuate the narrative that people are unable to control themselves from acting on their sexual impulses. Reflecting on just one iteration of this underlying narrative, Katelyn Beaty writes,

The Pence rule arises from a broken view of the sexes: men are lustful beasts that must be contained, while women are objects of desire that must be hidden away. Offering the Pence rule as a solution to male predation is like saying, “I can’t meet with you one on one, otherwise I might eventually assault you.” If that’s the case, we have far deeper problems around men and power than any personal conduct rule can solve.

Several respondents decried this narrative with something akin to outrage, with one saying, “I’m a mature person, and I am in control of myself!” For these leaders, to be subjected to the Graham Rule minimizes the hard work they have done in discipleship and character formation.

A third unintended consequence of the Billy Graham Rule is that it can systematically deprive women of access, power, and agency. One interviewee related the story of a time that she had to drive alone to a conference across Michigan’s Upper Peninsula because a male colleague insisted on not being alone in a car with her. At one level that reality alone was painful for this woman, primarily because his decision made her feel like she was some sort of threat to him. But, at a deeper level, what was more disturbing was the lack of access the arrangement afforded her. Often the drive home from a conference is where decisions get made about what will happen with the content from the conference, and, as she put it, “women don’t get the same access” when the Billy Graham Rule is in play.

These three critiques point to the harm that the Billy Graham Rule has done, primarily to women but also to men. Indeed, for the majority of those surveyed, a rigid adherence to the Billy Graham Rule only hinders mixed-gender partnerships from flourishing.

Thankfully, the research process generated a viable workaround. Instead of foisting the Billy Graham Rule on every mixed-gender partnership in every setting, the research suggests that women and men should thoughtfully discern what boundaries are right for their particular partnership in light of who each person is and is becoming, and then live out those boundaries with integrity and accountability.

The issue with the Billy Graham Rule is not boundaries themselves. In fact, research participants detailed a wide assortment of usable boundaries, including meeting in public places, meeting exclusively during daytime hours, letting others know if they are traveling together, and discerning whether certain topics should be off-limits. In one instance, a veteran female leader talked about a time she and her male coworker were traveling together on a ministry trip. The trip would involve an overnight, so they decided to stay with some of her donors “because if you’re in a hotel, it can look suspicious.”

So, the issue for those surveyed is not the presence of boundaries; instead, it is the universal application of the supremely restrictive boundary of the Billy Graham Rule. As Danielle Strickland notes, “To create safe boundaries for your life and ministry is a good idea. But taking the ones created for a specific set of circumstances at a certain point in time for a specific person and applying them to your life and ministry today is unhelpful, and in today’s world, actually harmful to women.” As women and men carefully discern the appropriate contextualized boundaries for their specific ministry partnership, that partnership is more likely to flourish.

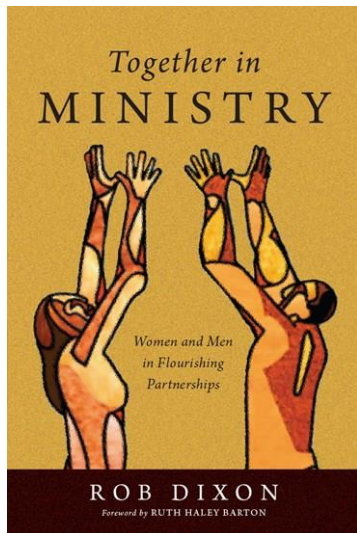
—Taken from chapter ten, “Contextualized Boundaries”



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## Q & A



### ***Together in Ministry*** *Women and Men in Flourishing Partnerships*

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Is it possible for churches and organizations to foster healthy mixed-gender ministry collaboration? Longtime ministry leader Rob Dixon casts a compelling—and encouraging—vision for flourishing partnerships between women and men. With research findings, biblical examples, real-life stories, and practical next steps, *Together in Ministry* equips teams and individuals with next steps for making that vision a reality.

## Fostering Healthy Mixed-Gender Ministry Collaboration

### **Why is the topic of mixed-gender ministry personally important to you?**

**Rob Dixon:** First of all, I perceive a sense of call to this work of helping women and men partner together in ministry and writing *Together in Ministry* is one way for me to express fidelity to that call.

Second, I care about flourishing mixed-gender ministry partnerships because my personal experience of serving with women has also been consistently wonderful. I have been mentored and supervised by women; I have had women as peers; and I've supervised women. I know the joy of mixed-gender ministry partnerships, and I want others to know that joy as well.

Finally, my wife, Amy and I are raising four kids, and so I'm invested in the question of what kind of church they will enter into. I long for our daughters and our son to encounter a church that welcomes them fully and invites them to use their gifts without limitations because of their gender.

### **What motivated you to write about a topic that many men would choose to avoid?**

**Rob:** Beyond the above, I feel fortunate to have several streams of motivation for my work with mixed-gender ministry partnerships, including launching *Together in Ministry* into the world. Having lots of motivation has helped because writing a book is hard work!

To begin, there are different ways to read the Bible on this topic, but my reading of the Bible compels me to this vision of women and men serving equally alongside one another in ministry. As I say in the book, your theology matters! When it comes to mixed-gender ministry partnerships, I deeply want to help the church embody the biblical vision, and I hope that *Together in Ministry* helps that to happen.

Next, as I describe in the introductory chapter, the church has been a place where women have experienced marginalization for too long, and I see that as an injustice. Our God cares about justice, and so I'm motivated to do my part to bring shalom to women in our faith communities.

Last, I'm motivated to expand and extend God's mission in the world. I truly believe that if the church can discern ways for women and men to partner together on equal footing, we will see God's mission move forward in greater measure. For hundreds of years we've effectively been trying to fulfill the Great Commission with half of our team relegated to the bench; it's time to try another approach!

### **What can women in the church do to support women who are serving in ministry roles?**

**Rob:** During my research process I interviewed a number of women who related some version of a similar narrative; that is, too often the church has placed limits on their ministry activities because of their gender and that marginalization was painful. That's not every woman's experience, but I think it's widespread enough that one way women can support each other is by providing a safe place to process and heal.



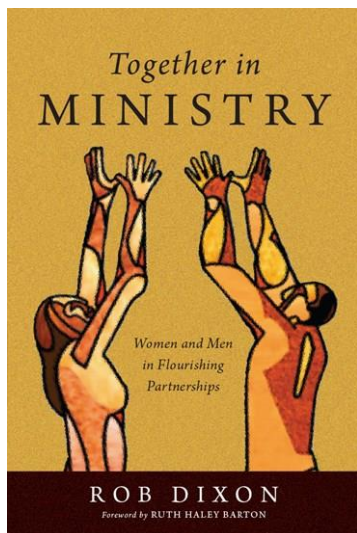
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*"Beautifully written, biblically incisive, and culturally astute, Together in Ministry traces human flourishing in mutual male and female partnerships. Weaving wisdom from colleagues, researchers, and thought leaders, Rob Dixon exposes systemic barriers and offers a road map unleashing the power of mixed-gender leadership. Together in Ministry is balm to the church's soul."*

—Mimi Haddad, president of CBE International

Alongside that, women can exhort one another. It seems like encouragement means just a bit more when it comes from someone who is also on the journey. So as women step into ministry roles that have historically been off-limits to them, the more support and encouragement from their sisters the better.

### **What can men do to help women who are in ministry roles?**

**Rob:** To begin with, I think men need to be doing their inner work, pursuing wholeness and healing, particularly in what *Together in Ministry* labels their "gender brokenness." Men need to be working to develop right views of themselves and right views of women. Like the Hippocratic oath suggests, "First, do no harm."

Next, if men can cultivate a robust learner's posture, they'll be better positioned to help. Most men I know want to fix things, but it's important to listen first. If men aspire to support women in leadership and in their networks, they should strive to become excellent at listening and learning.

Third, in so many sectors of society including in the church, men are granted greater power and privilege. What men like me do with our privilege matters. First, how aware are we of our privilege? Second, what are we doing with our privilege? Are we using it to bless others and in particular the women in our networks?

Finally, men can take on the identity of an ally. For me the term *ally* functions as an umbrella term with a collection of actions underneath it, including

- Solidarity, such as sitting with women in the pain and marginalization they experience in the church.
- Encouragement—we need more men serving as cheerleaders for women in ministry.
- Mentoring and sponsorship.
- Advocacy.

When it comes to the role that men can play in helping women thrive in their ministry leadership, I take my cues from Jesus. His incarnation, the revolutionary way he treated women in his day, and the equalizing work of the cross point me to the kind of man I want to be with the women in my networks.

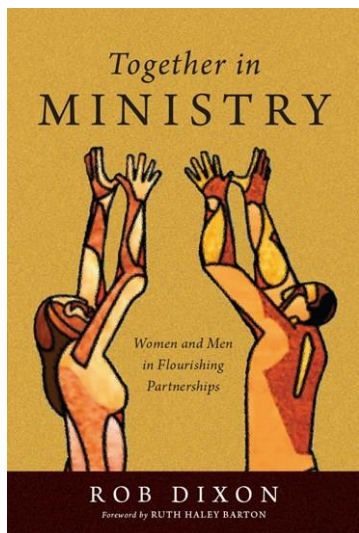
### **Is there anything in *Together in Ministry* for complementarians?**

**Rob:** In *Together in Ministry*, I lay out three points that emerged from my doctoral research regarding a theology of women in leadership. First, ministry partners need to be on the same page theologically. I think this makes intuitive sense; after all, it would be challenging to thrive in a ministry partnership that has conflicting theological foundations. Second, the research affirmed that for mixed-gender ministry partnerships to fully flourish, the "same page" needs to be an egalitarian one. Finally, I use the language of conviction to describe how flourishing partners hold their theology. In my view, conviction marries belief with action and that action step is vital.

People with a complementarian conviction will of course be challenged by that second point, but I'll encourage my complementarian sisters and brothers to read anyway! I'll maintain the importance of embracing an egalitarian theological position, but I think that complementarian mixed-gender ministry partnerships can benefit from much of the content in *Together in Ministry*. What partnership wouldn't be helped by a more robust learner's posture, abundant communication, and greater self-awareness from each of the partners?



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Malcolm Gladwell, as you say, quotes the “magic number for true expertise: ten thousand hours.” That’s pretty daunting. Would you say women and men need to practice partnership for ten thousand hours before they can have a flourishing ministry relationship?

**Rob:** Absolutely not! On the contrary, I think women and men can begin to experience the benefits of flourishing mixed-gender ministry partnerships from the very beginning. For instance, if partners intentionally push through awkwardness to clarify expectations early on, they’ll be able to more comfortably and confidently enter into partnership in the aftermath of that conversation. That can start on day one.

That said, the more practice the better. For most of us this notion of flourishing mixed-gender ministry partnerships will be novel or foreign. As with all new things, there will be a learning curve, so we’ll need all of the intentional focus and practice we can get! Personally, I know I remain a work in progress in this area, and I’ve been practicing flourishing mixed-gender ministry partnerships for twenty-five years. So I appreciate the spirit of Gladwell’s hypothesis; let’s be lifelong learners on this topic.

**Why is it just your name on the front cover? Why not coauthor with a woman?**

**Rob:** The short answer is that my name is on the cover because *Together in Ministry* represents the fruit of my seven-year journey between the doctoral program and process of writing the book.

That said, both the research and writing processes engaged a good number of women. On the research side, I interviewed some thirty women (half of the total sample), and their stories and perspectives animated the findings. On top of that, both of my doctoral advisors were women. Further I make choices in the book to share the stories of women that I’ve had the joy of serving alongside during my twenty-five years of ministry with InterVarsity.

On the writing side, I ran drafts of *Together in Ministry* by a number of women, and the final product is better because of their oversight and input.

So my name is on the cover, but I feel like I have dozens and dozens of female coauthors.

**Who do you envision benefitting from this book?**

**Rob:** When you start writing a book, it’s useful to think of your target audience, and I had a couple ideas in mind as I wrote:

- The mixed-gender pastoral leadership team (or elder board) where there is a general feeling that, *we’re not clicking like we could.*
- The seminarian who is just getting started and wondering if mixed-gender partnership is okay, and if so, what might it look like.
- The woman who has been struggling with a marginalized church experience and is in need of hopeful vision.
- And then I had in mind my fellow InterVarsity staff who work together every day on campus. I hope *Together in Ministry* helps advance our mission in greater measure.

Basically, my hope is that anyone who partners in ministry with someone of the opposite gender will find *Together in Ministry* to be a prophetic road map for forming partnerships that are personally satisfying and missionally effective. I’d love to see the book find its way onto course syllabi; I’d love to see it catalyzing conversations in church book groups; and I’d love to see well-read copies on the desks of pastors and leaders around the world.



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