

Justifying Your Leadership Calling

What most female ministers understand



BY **REV. LEANNE FRIESEN**

TWO YEARS AGO we were renovating my office at the church where I serve as the Lead Pastor. One day, one of our wonderful volunteers brought in a contractor who he hoped would do the carpentry work. My congregant cheerfully introduced me as his pastor. We made some small talk and I learned that the contractor was a devout Christian. We chatted about his church and he was cordial and polite. Yet, even as we talked I got a *feeling*. I thought to myself: “This man did not expect to meet a woman pastor and he does not like it.”

So I wasn’t surprised when my congregant called to tell me that his colleague was not willing to work with us. The carpenter told my friend that he simply could not work on an office for a female pastor. My dear congregant was embarrassed, and upset on my behalf. He understood, as I do, that not everyone feels that Scripture allowed women pastors, but he was aghast that someone would refuse to renovate an office for a church that holds a different view.

I was not aghast, not in the slightest. I am used to these things happening. That “feeling” that I mentioned was not a new one. It’s one that every female pastor I know understands.

I have fared well as a female minister. I found a job quickly after graduation and my church has always been

supportive of me. There are women who have had it much harder than me, women who could tell horror stories about being iced out of their local ministerials, who were refused job interviews, or told they should quit their jobs when they started having babies. I know women who have been publicly condemned or consistently shamed for living into their calling to serve as pastors. That has not been my experience, and for that I’m thankful.

But what is faring well? I say that I have been fortunate because I have learned to accept pushback as the norm. The truth is I have an array of stories like the one that started this piece. When I began looking for a job, a gentleman called me and asked if my husband (also a pastor) was looking for a job because he had heard me preach – but he didn’t agree with women preaching, so could I ask my husband to apply for their church’s pastoral role instead? When we sent out invitations for my ordination council, one church not only refused to attend, but also sent a letter stating their disagreement with my role. Pastors have declined participating in ministerials if they knew I would be in attendance. Strangers have asked me to justify what I do after I have officiated weddings, funerals and baby dedications.

And I have learned to say I haven’t had it “that bad,” because these are such regular occurrences that to focus on them too much is simply exhausting.

Being a woman pastor includes learning to live with the twinge of uncertainty that you will be judged, ostracized or criticized anywhere you go. Female pastors don’t have a simple privilege that our male colleagues can easily take for granted: that no one will question their calling simply because of their gender. Male pastors won’t experience anxiety when they go to a Christian gathering and wonder if they’ll have to defend what they do. They won’t have to worry what someone will say about men in ordained ministry when they open a new book, go to a conference, or scroll through Twitter. They won’t ever get “the feeling” that I got that day when speaking to the contractor. They won’t have someone refuse to work in their building because of their gender. And most of all – they won’t ever have to say “It’s OK. I’m *used to it*.” Unlike my congregant, women in ministry don’t get to be surprised when someone refuses to work with us.

To be clear, it’s a joy to serve as a woman in ministry. Through years of deep biblical study, the support of others, and the confirmation of the Holy Spirit, I have become confident and certain in my call. The little annoyances can be frustrating, but I can look past them. (And of course, it was easy enough to find another contractor for our office). Still, for women in ministry, the greatest grievance can be the little challenges we face day in and day out – one pushback at a time. ❶

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