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IDEAS AND INSIGHTS FOR ACTIVE CONGREGATIONS

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Women Pastors: Are Our Assumptions Accurate?

Returning from the hospital's emergency room, Pastor Joan hurriedly parked her car. The church's 150th Anniversary Dinner would begin in two minutes. She had planned to arrive early and greet people. But that was not possible.

The fellowship hall was packed with people, excitement, and the smell of baked casseroles. As Joan arrived at the head table, the governing board chairperson welcomed the crowd and asked her to give the invocation.

Before praying, Joan said, "I know that several of you are aware of Harry's heart attack. I'm happy to report that Harry is now stable and he is expected to live."

As she sat down, the board chairperson rose again. He called everyone's attention to the 150th Anniversary "placemat"—designed by the Anniversary Committee and delivered by the printer late that afternoon. The colorful sheet listed the names of all forty-seven pastors in the congregation's history, along with their dates of service. The last entry read: "Joan Kalder, 2008 to present."

The board chair said, "Joan, this placemat puts you on our official list of pastors. But more than that, after only one year with us, you are not merely on the list; you are *our pastor*."

The audience exploded with appreciative applause.

A New Trend in Some Denominations

A few denominations have been ordaining women as pastors for several centuries. However, the ordination of women into the pastoral ministry—in numerous denominations, in large numbers—is a major change. More denominations began ordaining women during the 1970s than in any other decade for the last 100 years.

What impact has this change had on the local church?

What Are Our Assumptions?

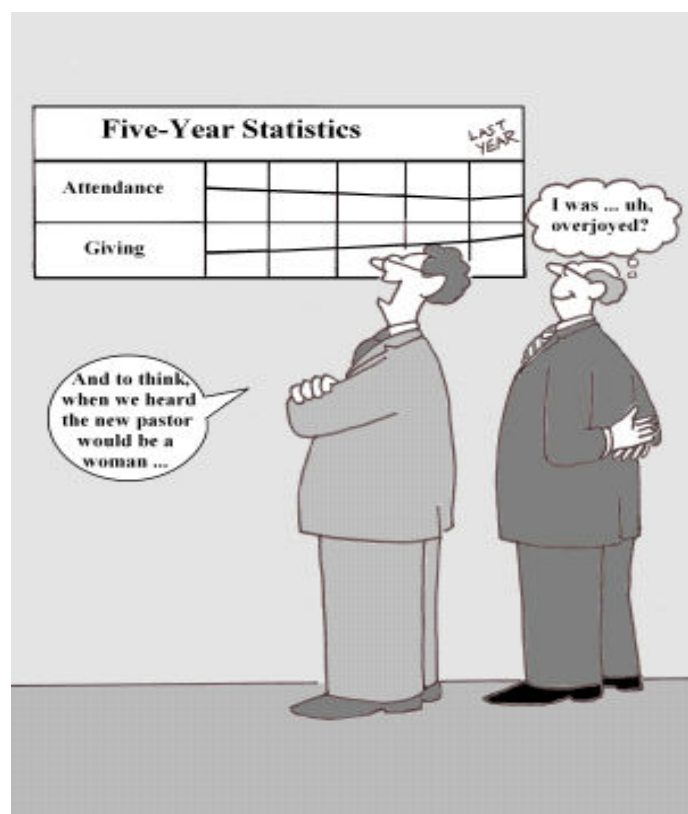
Every church member possesses unquestioned assumptions about the effectiveness of women pastors. Some of those assumptions are accurate; others are not. Now, research allows us to separate fact from fiction by reviewing thirty-year trends documented by six major studies.¹

The "Contact" Assumption: *If church members have some direct experience with clergywomen, they are more receptive to women as parish ministers.*

Joan's experience is typical. After a clergywoman serves a church for a while, she is usually well accepted by the parishioners. *Substantive* contact with a clergywoman, as one's own pastor, co-pastor, associate pastor, or interim minister creates greater openness to female pastoral leadership. In other words, to warm up to female leadership, a church member can't just *meet* a clergywoman or hear her preach at another church.

Since 1980, the number of clergywomen has more than tripled. Currently, one in five pastors in several of the main-line Protestant denominations is female. A generation ago many of these women might have become teachers, social workers, or community volunteers. Today their personal faith leads them to serve the local church.

The "Negative Outcome" Assumption: *When a woman becomes pastor, the church loses members to other congregations, sees its financial contributions shrink, and attracts only women worshipers.*



Do these negative outcomes ever happen when a new pastor arrives? Yes. But these negative outcomes are *not* more likely to occur when the new pastor is a woman rather than a man. In fact, research indicates that, on average, when the new pastor is a woman the worship attendance increases slightly, giving rises slightly, and the worshipers' gender make-up remains the same.

But the persistence of stereotypes—what people *think* is reality—tends to foster a frosty reception for the *first* clergywoman in some congregations. Countless members still believe that male pastors make the best match between the church and the pastor. And countless members still believe that women clergy have more problems in ministry, such as high absenteeism, more job turnover, conflict with their family roles, weak leadership skills, and temperaments not suited for serving a local church.

Preferences—what people feel is right for them—also influence what people *think* is reality. The majority of members say that the pastor's gender makes no difference to them. But for those with a preference, more men than women prefer a male pastor. Nor do clergywomen get universal support from their male colleagues. Two out of ten male pastors prefer a male minister. Unfortunately, that small fraction of male clergy, and that one-third of members who prefer a male pastor, can be a noisy and resistant minority.

The “Male Clergy Exodus” Assumption: *Because women have become pastors, denominations have lost members and closed churches, and more clergymen have left the ministry.*

The numerical decline in members and congregations² among several mainline denominations is attributable to many factors but not to the ordination or women.

Male and female clergy leave the ministry in about equal percentages, with slightly more women exiting than men. Both genders leave for a variety of reasons: they can't find placement, or they need more income to support themselves or their family, or they desire new challenges.

During the 1970s, two trends—fueled by financial factors such as inflation and rising costs of energy and health-care—began reshaping male and female clergy careers:

◆ First, congregations averaging fewer than 125 in worship attendance find it increasingly difficult to afford a full-time pastor.

◆ Second, the number of those small churches that cannot afford a full-time pastor is increasing.

As a result of those two trends, most full-time clergy (a) spend the majority of their working years as assistant pastors, associate pastors, pastors of small churches, pastors of two small “yoke-parish” churches, and medium-sized churches; and (b) have limited opportunities to serve in senior pastor positions. Only about one percent of clergy in most denominations become a senior pastor (supervising other clergy or staff members). Men have about twice the chance of becoming a senior pastor as do women.

The “Conflict” Assumption: *Clergywomen experience more conflict with the lay leadership than do their male colleagues.*

The amount of church conflict reported by male and female pastors is essentially the same. And the types of church members that tend to be at odds with the pastor are also the same. Business executives, middle-aged men and women, and church leaders who hold secular-workplace positions of authority are accustomed to making decisions in their organization.

Some of these people are unaware that they expect their pastor (and their church) to defer to their preferences or suggestions. When their counsel is questioned, or if they do not get the expected response, these leaders may react in ways that create conflict with the pastor.

About 5 percent of parishioners in any size or type of church are chronically unhappy with what's happening. Personnel committees can deal with misbehaving paid staff—but few churches have a means of dealing with unruly volunteers. This makes the pastor's role—whether male or female—an exceedingly complex leadership task.

The Bottom Line

A wise female church elder said, “We tolerate measles, we accept people. I don't want to be tolerated. I want to be accepted.” That preference is true with pastors of both genders.

Whether the current pastor is male or female, all parishioners (not just the personnel committee members) benefit from asking these six questions:

1. When we advertise an opening for a clergy position, do we so in a way that welcomes female applicants?
2. When we review applications for a clergy position, do we consider female applicants to the same degree as male applicants?
3. How often do we make unreasonable demands on our pastor?
4. How often are we unreasonably critical of our pastor?
5. In what ways do we show acceptance for our pastor?
6. In what ways do we make our pastor feel loved and cared for?

¹ Edward C. Lehman, Jr., “Women's Path into Ministry: Six Major Studies,” Pulpit & Pew Research Reports (2002), Duke Divinity School (www.pulpitandpew.duke.edu).

² Patricia M. Y. Chang, “Factors Shaping Clergy Careers: A Wakeup Call for Protestant Denominations and Pastors,” Pulpit & Pew Research Reports (2005), Duke Divinity School (www.pulpitandpew.duke.edu).