



What Are We Going to Do with Her?

The story of how one woman became a pastor

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Out of the corner of my eye, I could see a heated discussion going on about thirty feet away. My soon-to-be boss was absorbing the wrath of a parishioner, a man of about fifty who was gesticulating and intent, leaning into the conversation with force.

I had just preached my candidating sermon, and that evening the congregation would vote on whether or not to call their first woman pastor. After being invited to “throw my hat in the ring” for this associate pastoral position the previous April, I was now standing in the warm September sunlight, greeting people as they exited the small chapel.

But the conversation that I could see but not hear was distracting and worrisome. Clearly, the gentleman was upset—and yes, he was upset about me. *How could we hire a woman for a pastoral role? Didn't we believe the Bible? What was the senior pastor thinking?*

The year was 1996, and this congregation had recently completed a two-year study on the role of women in ministry. Our denomi-

nation began ordaining women in 1976, but the reality was, very few women made the short list for any call committees anywhere. This senior pastor wanted to open the door to that possibility, and he faced it head on by presenting it as a teaching topic for adult education. Clearly, that overwrought congregant had missed those sessions!

Overall, this community of people was open, willing to test the waters, and not overly anxious about the prospect of doing something groundbreaking. Yet there were these pockets of distress here and there. Good people, all of them. But some were frightened, uncertain, not yet convinced that there was grace enough, room enough, biblical warrant enough to allow a woman to teach, preach, and lead. At the congregational meeting that evening, the vote to call me as their pastor was more than 90 percent in favor, and I happily accepted the position.

I knew what I was walking into, and I actually looked forward to pushing against the fear, the stereotypes, the resistance—not with argument, but with presence. I figured that if I, by the grace of God, could do a

decent job of pastoring, then perhaps those who were worried could find a place to meet me somewhere in the middle of it all.

So that's what I began to do. Slowly, I got to know people. I made hospital and home visits; I met with committees; I led in worship; I preached approximately every six weeks; I offered the sacraments; I taught Sunday school; I helped with confirmation; I sent out birthday cards and thank you notes; I organized retreats and seminars. And I asked God to help me love these people.

Sometimes that last part was not easy. The gesturing gentleman remained angry about a lot of things, mostly about the fact that someone he loved dearly was seriously ill.

Slowly and gently, I stepped into their lives. It took time. And it took a serious downturn in health for the one he loved. I visited this person regularly—in the rehab center, in the hospital, at home. Life was lived with constant pain and slow loss of function. Over time, confidences were shared—and I heard about the fear that accompanies a long, lingering death. We grew to love each other through those regular visits—talking, praying, sitting in the silence.

When death came, it was clear that something had shifted in my relationship with that worried congregant, the one who had feared my arrival. We grew to love each other, too. I was the one to offer the pastoral prayer at the memorial service; I was the one to say the words as we laid this dear one in the ground.

I knew how far this man had come to meet me in this particular middle. And I also knew that he would never have gotten to that point *if he had not known me*, if he had not witnessed the truth with his own eyes.

Simply put, I became his pastor. And what was he going to do with me? Me—a living, breathing female person, anointing his loved one, offering the hope of the resurrection, doing

what I was called and gifted to do?

I never made an argument for my “right” to be there. I never opened the Scriptures for the purpose of justifying my presence in their life. I opened the Scriptures to read the word of God, to offer comfort from the Psalms and hope from the Gospel of John and promise from the Epistles of Paul.

I deeply believe that Scripture supports me and all women who are called to ministry. And I have made the arguments many times—out loud, in writing, in front of crowds, one on one. For a long time, I felt that was the best way to move forward, to bring change. And in the 1970s and 1980s, some very good and thoughtful biblical work was done, which paved the way for a lot of us.

Today I believe that change will come when more and more of those who still struggle with this issue are forced to ask, “What am I going to do with her?” Because seeing and experiencing a called and gifted woman lead, preach, teach, baptize, offer bread and cup, anoint the sick—this is the way the Spirit moves in the church; this is the way women live into their call; this is the way we more fully reflect the image of God in the congregation.

Now it's 2013 and, hard as it is to write these words, this story from the mid-1990s is still our reality, isn't it? We have been ordaining women for almost forty years, yet far too many people in far too many parishes still respond as that man did to the whole idea. What will it take to spread the word, to teach the truth, to live the commitment we've made?

Here is part of what it takes: we need not only women who are willing to step out and step up, but *men*—male pastors and denominational leaders who are willing to open the door and mean it; who are willing to teach the truth, to extend the invita-

tion for women to preach and teach, to include the names of women on lists of potential candidates, to bless and encourage women in their congregations who experience the call of God on their lives.

And it takes the people in the pews too—the ones who have been blessed by the ministry of women. We need you to speak up, to give witness, to offer words of encouragement, to acknowledge the wonderfully rich

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ways in which women contribute to the leadership of the congregation.

Are we ready to commit ourselves to this good task? Are we willing to fully own who we say we are? I believe that God is calling us to celebrate the full and equal partnership of men and women in leadership. We have said yes to the concept. Now we need to continue to say yes, and yes, and yes to the people, those women (and men too) whom God is calling and equipping to take us into the future.

So, in answer to the question, “What are we going to do with them?” let's put them to work and watch as the Spirit pours new life into congregations and conference offices and denominational leadership. As we more fully reflect the *imago Dei* in every part of our community life—in worship, in compassion ministries, in pastoral care, in spiritual formation, in denominational decision-making—I am convinced we will “see the LORD's goodness...in the land of the living” (Psalm 27:13, NLT). I can hardly wait. ■

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