

Excerpts from *Beyond The Stained Glass Ceiling: Equipping and Encouraging Female Pastors*, Chapter 3, “What Stands in Our Way?”

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The following excerpts represent issues, realities, mindsets that hinder women in ministry from breaking through and moving beyond the proverbial stained glass ceiling. The following discussed realities, however, speak to more than just women in ministry. Issues of gender and power, perception and denial and low expectations can impede any woman from reaching the highest heights and becoming all that God has called them to be before the foundation of the world.

Excerpt pages 33-39...

Gender and Power

Although patriarchal interpretations (and misinterpretations) of Scripture have shaped attitudes toward women, we need to delve deeper to understand fully the current discrimination against women in ministry. To flesh out causes for the dearth of women in the role of senior pastor, it is important to consider some underlying issues that influence a congregation’s choice not to call a woman as pastor.

From a sociopolitical standpoint, power, sex, and ignorance are the major issues—rather than theology, Scripture, or gifts for ministry. When it comes to Christian character, commitment to preaching and teaching the gospel of Jesus Christ, education, experience, references, leadership abilities, and suitability for a given body of believers, the women applying for pastoral positions are usually just as qualified as—or more qualified than—their male counterparts.

However, women are still far less likely to be offered such leadership roles. Often, even those who most vehemently oppose having women in church leadership remain close-lipped about the real reasons for their reluctance. But when pushed to explain, those who oppose women in the pastorate may offer the following reasons:

- _ A woman is not strong enough to lead.
- _ It’s not God’s will for a woman to become a pastor.
- _ A woman should be at home with her husband and children.
- _ A woman can’t handle oversight of a church.
- _ Men will not follow a woman.

In many ways, churches have remained captive to the patriarchal character of the larger culture. Although women have made great strides in recent decades, society in the United States remains patriarchal, and women still lag behind men in top-level positions and salaries.

The complex dynamics of racism also play a role in the oppression of women of color. For some communities of color in the United States—especially the African American community—the church is one of the few places where men hold positions of power and influence. These men may be considered of nominal influence on the job or in the marketplace, but when they come to church, they are deacons, elders, bishops, or pastors. Men may be reluctant to share these leadership roles with women.

Yet often the most vocal opponents of female pastors are not men but other women. Some women view female clergy as being “out of biblical order,” usurping the authority of men in the church. In his article about women pastors, Darryl Izzard quotes one female reader who believes men should lead in both home and church:

I am a woman. I have been happily married to a God-fearing man for twenty-two years, and it has been the best of my life. I see my husband as the head of the household. He is head Elder in our local church. He is also a lay Pastor. I would never dream of usurping his authority in the home or the church. The marriage in our home and in the church works because we live the Biblical principles of a husband and a wife. I honor him as head of the home, and he honors me as his helpmate, companion, and friend.²

What a tragedy that such thinking is still an issue in the twenty-first century! Yet many women share this belief that female pastors are in violation of God’s ordained structure for the family and the church. In the minds of these individuals, the clergywoman’s assertion that God has called her to lead a congregation seems heretical. And those who operate under this assumption can be quite difficult (but not impossible) to convince otherwise.

Other women are resistant to female pastors because of fears and desires of which they may not even be aware. For some women, the male pastor is the only man in their lives. He is the only man for whom they can bake a cake or a pie, relish the authoritativeness of his voice, or cherish how proud he makes them feel as he represents them in the larger community. They appreciate the male

pastor as a role model for their sons, especially those young men who may not have a father figure at home. He makes them feel safe and satisfied psychologically.

Ruth Brandon Minter illuminates these issues, explaining that unconscious and unarticulated emotions related to sexuality often drive women's resistance to female pastors.³ As an example, Minter speaks about the interactions between male pastors and older women who may be widowed or never married. Many of these women primarily have other older women as friends. The only "safe" male touch a woman in this life situation experiences may come on Sunday morning when she greets the pastor. The male pastor's warm embrace or grasp of her hand affirms and validates her womanhood. His comments about her beautiful hat or outfit may generate feelings of appreciation and a joy that someone still finds her attractive. For younger women, the male pastor may be a welcomed male confidant who can counter derogatory or hurtful comments from insensitive men. If he is attractive, personable, and fun to be with, the male pastor can fill a void for female parishioners that a woman cannot.

Despite being written nearly two decades ago, Minter's observations still hold true today. These realities are formidable and extremely difficult to overcome. To further explore what stands in the way of progress for female clergy, it is important to consider the circumstances that breed divisions among women.

Excerpt, pages 46-52...

Complexities of the *Imago Dei*

Imago Dei is a Latin phrase that means "image of God." It is a theological concept that asserts that we humans, both men and women, were created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27) and are therefore god-like in nature. God placed within each of us a reflection of the divine self; in other words, we have some of God's traits. God granted us dominion over the earth. Therefore, we desire to lead. God breathed into us the Spirit. Therefore, we are aware that we are more than what seems readily apparent. God has imprinted us with a divine sense of a purpose and a plan; therefore, we desire to become more than what our present circumstances may dictate.

Although we are not worthy of the praise due to God's holy name, we also desire praise. As Christians, we know that to walk in the Spirit means we must avoid selfishness, pride, and arrogance.

However, we all desire healthy recognition, appreciation, and praise, and if we are honest, we acknowledge that desire. In an environment where honor, praise, appreciation, respect, opportunity, and unconditional love are shared appropriately, issues of jealousy and power playing should be minimal. Because of our fallen nature, some residue of sinful pride and envy may exist, but these should not dominate.

When gifts and talents are truly recognized, when opportunities to grow and rise are present, and when honor, respect, and praise are appropriately given, rivalry is negligible. Women, however, consistently have been denied access to the inherent blessings of God's endowment to humanity. When any individual or group is disrespected, underappreciated, and denied opportunities, the "crab in the bucket" mentality will thrive. A tendency to push others down in order to grab one of the few places at the top will abound. When individuals are forced to struggle and fight for any kind of recognition, when they are weary of being passed over, divisions and strife will prevail. Oppression produces strange fruit and unfortunate results. Those who have been oppressed often become that which they claim to despise.

A few women have been able to break through the stained glass ceiling to become the pastors of large churches that are financially stable and thriving. However, there is a certain lure of elitism for those who have made it into the club. Often, those who have broken through the glass ceiling neglect to help others climb through the cracks. When a struggling female minister reaches out to be mentored by a successful sister in the pastorate, her phone calls, emails, and cards may go unanswered. When preaching or workshop opportunities open at the church of a successful female pastor, she may find it easier to offer such openings to popular male clergy or another sister who has already made it. Often, little attention or effort goes to encouraging new female ministers who are climbing the ladder.

Sexism and racism have some tragic similarities. Racial minorities have been given "compliments" such as "You are so intelligent! You are not like *them*. You are different!" The implication is obvious: "*You people* are usually ignorant and incapable, but somehow you're not like the rest." What an insult! Many person of color have heard these words not as insults but rather as a reprieve from oppression—a welcomed affirmation, a hint of praise. Women have dealt with the same dynamics as they have reached higher levels. Out of extreme thirst for acceptance, they drink in patronizing words such as, "You aren't like

those other women; you can preach,” or, “I like how feminine you are; you aren’t trying to act like a man.” When one is psychologically and emotionally hungry, it is tempting to be drawn into the illusion of acceptance and relish the thought of being a part of the upper crust.

A woman who gains one of the precious few spots on the other side of the glass ceiling is faced with a choice. She can guard her status and bask in the warmth of artificial acceptance while knowing that true acceptance of women in ministry would open the door wider for others. Or she can reject and challenge patronizing remarks like, “We like you because you aren’t always preaching about women’s rights.” She can seize that moment to engage the one making the remark in a different conversation. She can highlight the many reasons why women may feel compelled to speak often about their rights or preach “like a man” due to the lack of female role models in the pastorate. She can emphasize the gifts and anointing God places upon all who are called to pastor, irrespective of gender. Without condoning the overly aggressive behaviors sometimes exhibited by wounded women, the female pastor who has broken through can assist by clearing the barriers for others. She can cultivate a heightened awareness of the painful realities women face as they struggle to accept and pursue their God-given calling.

For some women pastors the feelings of superiority and the sweet taste of acceptance can seem far more attractive than staying in the trenches and fighting so others can share the stage. After all, martyrs die—and who wants to make that kind of sacrifice? Too often, women do more to stand in the way of progress and suppress one another’s goals and accomplishments than does any man. Apostle Dr. Mamie J. Harris Smith reflected on the struggles some women have in supporting other women:

I think out of ignorance some women come against women pastors. Some have the mindset that women are not supposed to preach. Some women do not respect women pastors the same way they respect a man. They want you to be their “girlfriend.” If you are anointed, they feel threatened by you. They are afraid that you may come back and rise above them.

I try to make a platform for others. That’s what trailblazers do. You have to be secure in yourself. If you can’t support others you have to understand why. It is because of unmet needs, unresolved issues, and unhealed hurts.⁴....

The Power of Perception and Denial

Self-perception is powerful. We have received so many mixed messages about what it means to be a woman that we often struggle to identify and maintain a healthy self-image. Clergywomen are no different. An unhealthy self-image will thwart progress. An anonymous writer (<http://answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20081101222455AASsMIT> from the *Yahoo Answers website*) shared,

“People tend to live life like theater, acting with masks that read other than what they truly are.” Shakespeare emphasized the need for authenticity in these famous words from *Hamlet*:

*This above all: to thine own self be true,
And it must follow, as the night the day,
Thou canst not then be false to any man.¹⁰*

One would think that clergywomen, as bearers of the Truth (the Word of the holy God), would walk, live, and breathe truth as a way of being. However, due to human frailty, we also fall prey to perception and denial. When masks are worn to hide our inward and outward struggles, not only are others deceived, but ultimately, we become deceived about ourselves. The fear of what others may think, the concern over how we will appear, the dread of being pushed out or locked out of certain places, and the superwoman syndrome all play a part in our tendency to deny our own struggles.

My research for this book included a survey of more than one hundred female senior pastors regarding the pressures of ministry in the local church. Each pastor was asked to respond to a series of statement by indicating whether she strongly agreed, moderately agreed, moderately disagreed, or strongly disagreed.

In response to the statement, “I find myself wearing many hats to handle the day-to-day operation of the church,” an overwhelming 83 percent indicated that they strongly or moderately agreed. Of course, “wearing many hats” means different things to different people—but the image definitely suggests a juggling act of sorts. Women tend to be multitaskers by nature. Also, because women tend to pastor smaller, struggling churches that are often financially unstable, there may be minimal human and monetary resources.

Many of these pastors use their own money to fund activities, pay church bills, and support mission efforts. Often they are without associate staff or laypersons who are willing to help conduct necessary matters of church operation. Alongside the primary roles of preacher and pastoral caregiver, a woman pastor may find herself expected to conduct most church meetings, answer phones, develop and print bulletins, visit the sick—and raise the dead! And all this is in addition to the many and various important roles she may play outside of the church—daughter, wife, mother, sister, and friend—plus her involvement in other community activities and associations.

Indeed, most women pastors do wear many hats and parcel energy into many and varied areas of service. That is why it is simultaneously interesting and disconcerting that the majority of women in the survey *disagreed* with the following statement: “I frequently feel frustrated because of the lack of resources and finances to carry on the ministry of the church.” More than half of the clergywomen surveyed (56%) disagreed with this statement.

More than half of the pastors in the survey would not admit to frustration in the midst of minimal resources. Women in general—and religious women in particular—have been taught to accept what is available and make do. Although the desire to break through the glass ceiling may be present, the belief that a pastor deserves to have more may feel antithetical to godliness.

Therefore, she grins and bears her difficult circumstances. To cover her pain, she wears a mask. Many give the impression that all is well, that they are doing fine, that nothing is falling through the cracks (including their physical, mental, and spiritual health), because they believe it is absolutely necessary to keep the ball rolling at any expense. But continuing to wear the mask, continuing to pretend to be unaffected by the intense pressures of minimal resources, continuing to behave as if it’s all good is not just denial; it can also be deadly!

Why do so many clergywomen wear the mask? Perhaps it is because we fear how others will perceive us if we admit that all is not well. Maybe we want to avoid appearing weak or inadequate. If we admit our struggles, we are afraid someone will say, “See? Pastoring is a man’s job, and a woman can’t handle it.” We want to prove that women are good enough, strong enough, and smart enough to get the job done. So we may buy into the lie that the false perceptions and negative opinions of others somehow control our destiny. But by continuing to wear a mask, we prevent ourselves from receiving the help that may be available; thus, we remain

stuck in downward spiraling environments.

God declared that it is not good that one should be alone (Genesis 2:18). Although these words from Scripture were spoken in the context of God's creating a helpmate for Adam, they also speak to the need of every human being to live in community. When clergywomen continue to wear masks and deny their struggles, frustrations, pain, and need for help, they miss opportunities for God to bring support, assistance, and healing into their lives.

The superwoman image also sets a bad example for the people of God. The "do it all yourself" mentality is dysfunctional. God provides support systems in human form. If clergywomen are to break through the glass ceiling and move beyond the broken fragments on the other side, they will need to remove the mask of denial and be honest with themselves and others.

Low Expectations

Commonly, women are reluctant to take practical steps toward advancement. In *Women Don't Ask: Negotiation and the Gender Divide*, Linda Babcock and Sara Laschever contend that women tend to have low expectations for themselves and often lack knowledge of their true worth. The authors have found that many women are grateful to be offered a job, so they are willing to accept whatever salary is offered rather than negotiating. They also suggest that women often do not know the market value of their work. Women report salary expectations that are between 3 and 32 percent lower than the expectations of men for the same jobs.

On average, men expect to earn 13 percent more than women during their first year of full-time work, and 32 percent more at the peak of their careers.¹¹ Although the data reflect the expectations of women in the secular realm, clergywomen frequently make the same mistakes. And, in the case of clergy, personal theologies may further cloud the issue. A clergywoman may think that negotiating for a higher salary or a higher-level position is haughty or materialistic. She may believe that being willing to accept a low-paying, low-benefit, high responsibility pastoral position at a struggling congregation is a way of honoring God—and in some cases, this may be true. But she may not be aware that historical and societal influences are at play in her way of thinking.

Low expectations create a psychological and emotional ceiling that prevents women from reaching the heights they might otherwise achieve. In order for clergywomen to break through the

stained glass ceiling, we must be willing to expand our thinking, expect higher and better for ourselves, and know that God is not displeased by our desire to rise. We must understand that God's power in our lives and ministries will not diminish if we gain entrance to higher levels or positions, because it is God who lifts us up (Psalm 75:6-7).

As discouraging as the stories and statistics in this chapter may be, we must explore the realities of the struggle if we would develop strategies to break through the barriers. Just as women travail in labor to bring forth the beauty of new life, so women in ministry must bear down and push until a new reality is birthed.

When you are tempted to give up, consider the words of Isaac Watts in his great hymn:

*Must I be carried to the skies
on flowery beds of ease,
while others fought to win the prize,
and sailed through bloody seas?*

*Are there no foes for me to face?
Must I not stem the flood?
Is this vile world a friend to grace,
to help me on to God?*

*Sure I must fight, if I would reign;
increase my courage, Lord.
I'll bear the toil, endure the pain,
supported by thy word.¹²*

“Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain” (1 Corinthians 15:58, NRSV).

Notes

1. Bonnidell Clouse and Robert G. Clouse, eds., *Women in Ministry: Four Views* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1989); Dennis O. Earls, *Daughters of God: Southern Baptist Women in the Pulpit: Heresy vs. the Call to Preach* (Frederick, MD: PublishAmerica, 2006).
2. Darryl Izzard, “*Gospel Today Returns with a Cover*

Featuring Dynamic Women Pastors,” GospelToday.com, January 9, 2011, <http://mygospeltoday.com/?p=2444> (accessed November 21, 2012).

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3. Ruth Brandon Minter, “Hidden Dynamics Block Women’s Access to Pulpits,” *Christian Century*, August 29–September 5, 1994, p. 805.

4. Christine A. Smith, interview with Mamie J. Harris Smith, Griffin, Georgia, October 2011

5. Christine A. Smith, interview with Marilyn Parker-Jeffries, Cleveland, Ohio, December 2011

6. The Barna Group, “Number of Female Senior Pastors in Protestant Churches Doubles in Past Decade,” <http://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/17-leadership/304-number-of-femalesenior-pastors-in-protestant-churches-doubles-in-past-decade> (accessed November 21, 2012).

7. Barbara Brown Zikmund, Adair T. Lummis, and Patricia M. Y. Chang, *Clergy Women: An Uphill Calling* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998), 98.

8. Zikmund, Lummis, and Chang, *Clergy Women*, 98.

9. Christine A. Smith, interview with Julia Moses, Cleveland, Ohio, July, 2012.

10. William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, act 1, scene 3, lines 78-82.

11. Linda Babcock and Sara Laschever, *Women Don’t Ask: Negotiation and the Gender Divide* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003); overview, “Interesting Statistics,” <http://www.womendontask.com/stats.html> (accessed November 21, 2012).

12. Isaac Watts, “Am I a Soldier of the Cross?” (1761).

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