

When the message is not enough

By [Susan M. Reisert](#)

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When I arrived at Old South Church about a decade ago, I was fortunate to have found a church home that, though it had never had a female pastor, was well-acquainted with the leadership of women. The organist-music director was a woman and women held posts in the board of deacons and trustees.

There were a few women that I was drawn to almost immediately. They were smart, independent, and funny. One of those women I especially liked. In addition to being smart, independent, and funny, she was also honest and forthright.

When that particular woman, I'll call her Sally, made the decision to leave the church, she came to meet with me. Honestly and with a great deal of clarity, Sally shared why and how she had come to the decision to leave. She had started going to another area church, a much more conservative church. She had family attending that church, including a grandchild. There was something about that church that fed her in ways that Old South did not, and probably never would.

Sally left Old South with my blessing. Thankfully, though, I still saw her from time to time. Occasionally, she would show up for worship at Old South, and I saw her at church-related events. But, I never quite had the courage to ask her the questions that were burning in my brain, mostly around her experience at a more conservative church, and especially at a church that limited the leadership of women.

But finally my curiosity got the best of me and I asked her to join me for coffee. We had a wonderful visit. I had been specific with her that I had some questions for her, mostly related to her transition from one kind of church to a very different kind of church.

As expected, her answers were honest and forthright, humble and clear. One of the questions that I posed asked about being a smart, thoughtful, independent woman in a church that put limitations on women. Sally, in particular, may not feel the pull to the pulpit, to preach, but what if she did, or what about other women? How did she not only survive, but thrive, in such a church?

Sally paused, thoughtfully. Finally she said, “It does bother me. It does.” And, then another pause until this, “But, it’s not a deal breaker.”

In churches like Old South, where we celebrate the gifts of ministry regardless of gender, (and where we welcome and affirm the gifts of ministry regardless of sexual orientation), I wonder if we are aware that our message of inclusion and love only goes so far. We would like to think that those who feel the pull of the Christian faith will realize that some churches put limits on the love of God, while other churches do not. While that does, at times, happen, I fear that it doesn’t happen nearly enough—or not nearly as often as we would like.

We want our message to be a magnet that will draw the faithful from “limiting” churches to churches like ours. But, the message may not be enough.

Sally left a church where she was among the younger members to join a church where she is among the oldest. She left a church that welcomed her gifts and talents, regardless of gender, and joined a church that teaches that women cannot preach. She left a church that is reticent about speaking of faith publicly and joining together to express faith in the community, and joined a church where she can speak freely of faith and can join with others, openly and publicly, in living out faith and mission in the community.

Clearly the latter has been more important than the former, for Sally and probably for others too.

It’s important that we not get caught up in the notion that one way of doing church is “right” or “good” and that other ways are “bad” or “wrong.” But I think it can be said that there are ways of doing church that speak to more people than other ways.

On the one hand, I feel like churches like Old South need to change in order to survive. But, on the other hand, I feel like churches like Old South should feel free to continue to do what is meaningful to them—even if that means that they may not survive well into the future.

What’s important here, I think, is not to delude ourselves into thinking that our way of doing things, or any kind of slogan we might come up with (like the UCC “God is still speaking,”) will magically turn the tide and will cause people to flock through our doors. It’s important that we continue to stay close to being church, and to do what we do not because we’ve always done it that way, but because it draws us

closer to God and to each other. That might mean we continue what we do, and it may also mean that we try some changes.

Let's not lose sight of what is at stake: faithfulness to the gospel. That's really all that matters.

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