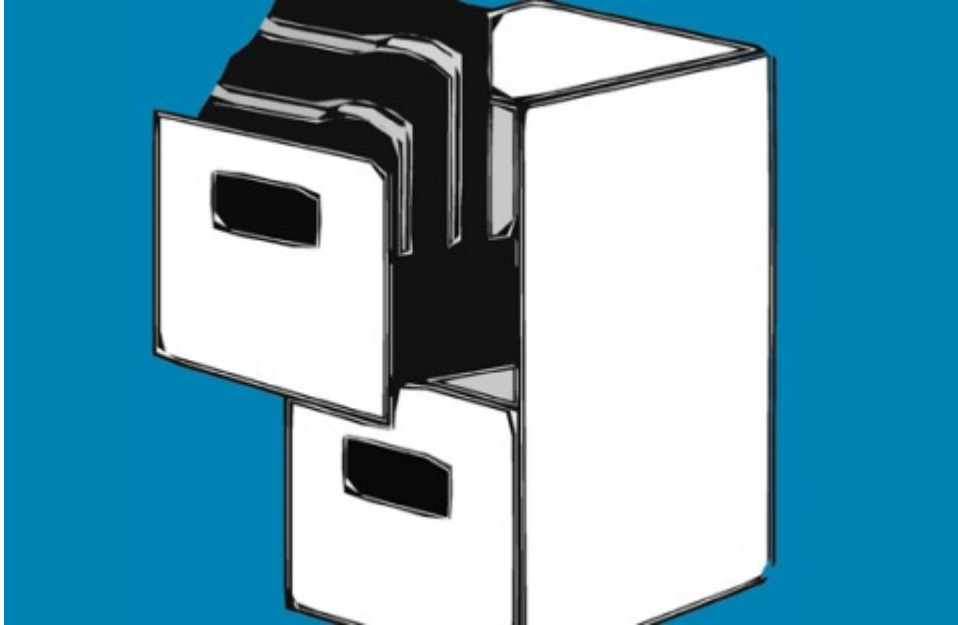


Pulpit rotation: Case by case

by [Ellen Blue](#) in the [June 12, 2013](#) issue



Congregational life presents a broad range of conflicts and dilemmas in which theological and ecclesial issues are entwined with the complex drama of human relations. Such challenges are also moments in which Christian witness can be clarified. This fictional narrative, which is followed by an analysis, is the third in a series.

A rural church was Madeline Doyle's first pastorate. During her first year there, she learned much about the rhythms of farming. She watched her parishioners prepare the ground and plant the seeds in the spring, tend the crops through the summer and then look toward the harvest in the fall. She felt that she had come to understand a lot about life that she had never noticed as a girl and as a young woman who lived in the city. Learning to fit into small-town life was something she viewed as an important task, and Madeline had made sure to demonstrate her eagerness to learn the ways of her parishioners and her neighbors.

From the start she had attended the meetings of the Ministerial Alliance, which was organized in her county seat town—though *organized* was probably too strong a word for it. It primarily consisted of meeting with other ministers for coffee and pie

at a local diner once a month to catch up on news and coordinate a few townwide projects.

Madeline had arrived in town after the plans for the community Easter sunrise service were well under way. There was a Fourth of July parade in the summer, but no pastoral responsibilities were associated with it. As late August arrived and students returned to school, the Alliance members worked, primarily within their own churches, to collect backpacks and school supplies for students in need. Madeline had hopes that they might be able to organize a tutoring program, particularly for the children of farm laborers whose educations suffered from frequent moves. It was also time to begin planning the community Thanksgiving service.

The tradition was for the Thanksgiving service to move from church to church, following a particular order. The preachers also alternated in an established order, as did the choirs, in such a way that the building, the preacher and the choir for the event came from three separate congregations.

Madeline's own board members had told her in August when they looked at the fall calendar that the community Thanksgiving service would be at the Southern Baptist church that year and that it was their own church's turn to supply the preacher. Madeline knew there might be difficulties with a woman preaching in this conservative town, but since the parishioners didn't say anything about it, she didn't either. When she called the regional minister to ask what he thought about the situation, he advised her not to expect difficulty until it arrived. "The local congregations have a lot of autonomy, and we don't know how the local church and pastor will react. I think you shouldn't rock the boat until you're clear on whether there will be a problem."

As she drove to the diner for the September gathering of the Ministerial Alliance, she reminded herself that the group had included her in its work so far without objection. She decided that letting someone else bring up the topic was the best strategy. But as the meeting was coming to a close, no one had yet mentioned the service. She began feeling uneasy, but she framed her words in a positive way.

"My members are looking forward to the Thanksgiving service," she said.

"Good," said Bill Jarvis, the Southern Baptist pastor. "We're looking forward to having everybody there. Glenda," he said, looking around for the waitress and

catching her eye. “We’re ready for our checks over here.” He busied himself pulling out his wallet.

After a few seconds, when no one else spoke, Madeline said, “My parishioners tell me it’s our church’s turn to supply the preacher. Does that mean I’m responsible for developing the order of worship, too, or is there a set order that’s always used?”

The men all looked at one another. “Well, now, Miss Doyle,” Jarvis began. “To tell you the truth, a whole lot of folks have objected to having you in our pulpit. You’re the first lady minister in our area, and frankly, the community’s just not ready for it. We’ve decided that I’ll preach this year. We’ll go back to the rotation when things are back to normal—after you’re gone. I’m sure you understand.”

He actually seemed surprised when she said that she didn’t. The pastors usually paid at the cash register and joked with the cashier, but this time they just put their money on the table and left. As it seemed to Madeline later, they practically fled from the diner.

She knew that women pastors faced resistance, but her own church had seemed to accept her appointment with only a modicum of hesitation. When she got home she called her regional minister and was told that he was out of town that week.

Then she called several key laypeople in her congregation. From them she learned that the congregation members had anticipated this problem and had discussed it. They had decided that no one from their congregation should go to the service if she wasn’t allowed to preach. She welcomed that affirmation of the congregation but was no less unhappy with how the Alliance meeting had gone, and she worried that if the congregation stayed away from the service, it would likely be harder in the future for the congregations to work together.

She got in touch with Victor, the pastor she was closest to among the pastors in town. Victor hadn’t attended the latest meeting of the Ministerial Alliance, and she thought the meeting might have gone differently if he had been there. Victor was part of a denomination that ordained women, and his wife was planning to begin seminary the next fall. When Madeline told him what had happened, he said: “As long as your church is supporting you, that’s all that really matters. Just forget the rest of them.”

“But I was so pleased the churches could work together with the school supplies project, and I had hopes we could work together on other things the community needs,” Madeline replied. “My parishioners are already hinting that they won’t cooperate if the Alliance shuts us out, and frankly, I’m not sure how I’ll cooperate with them myself. ‘Forget the rest of them’ isn’t very practical advice when you live in a town this size.”

[Read Angela Reed's response](#)