

Women take the reins at three tall-steeple mainline churches

by [Adelle M. Banks](#) in the [October 1, 2014](#) issue

In quick succession, three women have been chosen to lead historic tall-steeple churches in major cities.

In May, Shannon Johnson Kershner became the first woman solo senior pastor at Chicago's Fourth Presbyterian Church. In June, Amy Butler was elected senior pastor of New York City's Riverside Church. And in July, Ginger Gaines-Cirelli began leading Foundry United Methodist Church in Washington, D.C.

"For women to speak in those pulpits and speak boldly as public voices in these very public buildings is very powerful," said Serene Jones, president of Union Theological Seminary, who recently hosted a dinner party to welcome Butler to town.

Many denominations have for decades included women in their clergy ranks. The rise of these three women has been faster than many of their counterparts. The Hartford Institute for Religion Research reports that women clergy are much more likely to serve in smaller congregations.

Diana Butler Bass, a scholar and author of *Christianity After Religion*, hailed the arrival of these women—all in their forties and leading large, urban, neo-Gothic churches—but also wondered if they reflect the "General Motors phenomenon."

"Are women coming into leadership only as the institutions are collapsing?" Bass asked. "Now that they're in crisis, it's almost like the men are moving out and, 'Oh well, we'll just leave it to the women.' Then if the church doesn't succeed, it's the woman's fault. It's kind of a double-edged sword."

Gaines-Cirelli, 44, doesn't view it that way.

"There are challenges, and I think that we face them," she said. "The fact that women are being counted among those who are capable of facing those challenges at the highest level is a very positive sign."

Cynthia Woolever, a sociologist of religion who edits the *Parish Paper*, a newsletter for regional offices of mainline denominations, noted that the movement of women

to these significant sanctuaries is occurring in mainline Protestantism, where about 20 percent of congregations are led by clergywomen.

“If you look at conservative Protestant churches, you find very few; in the Catholic church, zero,” Woolever said. “It’s wonderful that women are being given those kinds of opportunities to serve in those very large churches, but it’s a very small slice of the pie.”

All three of the senior pastors have had to jump gender-specific hurdles.

In June, Butler wrote on social media about how a funeral director didn’t believe she was a minister. She also once had to get an emergency room security guard to log on to her former church’s website to show him her photo there so she could pay a late-night visit to a sick congregant.

“Look, I know you’re his girlfriend,” the guard told her before she convinced him otherwise.

Kershner said that early in her ministry, when she was a hospital chaplain, she often was rebuffed because she was not a “real minister.”

In every place she’s served as the first woman pastor, Gaines-Cirelli has heard a variation on this theme: “I was so worried that we were getting a woman, but I think you’re going to be just fine.”

Comparable pay has been yet another hurdle. But both Butler and Len Leach, chair of Riverside’s church council, said the pastor’s base salary of \$250,000 is equivalent to that received by her predecessor, Brad Braxton.

“It is a big job, and for me it’s a big, wonderful opportunity and a big risk, and so I think the Riverside Church has really stepped out here to set a great example for the rest of Christendom,” said Butler, a native Hawaiian who will lead a majority black congregation.

Butler described her total package, including benefits, as “fair.” Leach said Butler decided to give \$35,000 annually to the interdenominational church’s general fund and an additional \$26,000 as a scholarship to pay the annual tuition of a student at the church’s day school.

Kershner and Gaines-Cirelli also said they are paid fairly.

All three women are not only leading congregations but staffs that include other female clergy. Riverside's staff has four other women clergy, Fourth Presbyterian Church has three female associate pastors, and Foundry has one female associate pastor as well as a woman executive pastor.

"The truth is that for years, it was all men; in some places it still is, and nobody bats an eye," Gaines-Cirelli said. "So the fact that we are live-streaming to the world this other vision is kind of powerful."

Leo Lawless, a Foundry member, agreed.

"It's about time, isn't it?" he said, noting that a recent worship service featured Gaines-Cirelli and two other women clergy, and two female acolytes as well as a laywoman who read the scriptures.

The three senior clergywomen all say they look forward to the day when they're viewed simply as their congregation's pastor, rather than its woman pastor.

Kershner said, "My hope is that little boys and little girls see me and the other clergy and think if that's something that they say and others think God's calling them to do, then they can do it." —Religion News Service

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