

Servant, predator and too-entitled pastors

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When I began in ministry, it was usually men who took the time to advise and counsel me. I was in a more conservative area of the country so there were few women, and the ones who were there were far away from the rural swamp where I served. They were in more urban areas, miles from the lectionary group where we sipped chicory coffee.

As grateful as I am for their time and mentorship, it took me years to sort out that I needed to consider the source of a lot of the counsel. As a 26-year-old woman, I was dealing with different issues than the pastors surrounding me. Here are some of the things I often hear in ministry, that I've had to adjust for my circumstances.

You are a servant. Yes, I am a servant. A servant of the church, and a servant of God. However dwelling on servant-leadership was not the best thing for me when I entered the parish. People who hear me preach generally respect me. But when people who don't know me enter the room, they look to me to get the coffee. I am someone who wants people to be as comfortable as possible, so I happily oblige. I like to jump to fill every one's cup. Then I quickly become the fetch-it girl and never make it to the leadership part of servant-leadership equation. So I spend a lot of time reminding myself, "You're not a servant."

Yes, there are many pastors who need to be reminded of our humble position. Christ is the head of the church, we have a different role than parishioners, but it's not one of high lord and master. But the advice to be the least of these and servant of all can be destructive. It isn't always what we need to meditate upon, especially when most people assume you're their servant in the first place.

Clergy are sexual predators. Thank God we have wonderful sexual misconduct material that reminds clergy of the important boundaries that so often get blurred in the minds of the powerful. We learn how it is so easy to want to comfort and care for the bereaved, but we can end up crossing emotional lines that lead to sexual misconduct. The picture is typically the same: big, powerful male clergy begins to

prey upon the helpless female victim of life's catastrophes. Since we are ambassadors for Jesus Christ, a sexual betrayal can not only destroy a life, but it can also demolish a parishioner's spiritual outlook.

The problem with these broad brush strokes is that they often ignore the times when clergy are not the ones in power. Clergy might just be the victims in the scenario. Or they might be working from a place of sexual trauma that is ignored in our "clergy = sexual predator" paradigm. Women (and others) are often victimized in our profession, but we don't always have the narratives to name that or the understanding to deal with it. The prototype becomes destructive when it taints the story of someone who's been harassed.

Salary and benefits are not important. Right now, there's a dramatic shake up in our denominations, as many churches move to part-time clergy. I often hear the mantra that it's selfish for clergy to expect a salary and benefits. We shouldn't be so entitled. We should expect bi-vocational ministry.

The problem is that many people don't come to this job from a position of wealth. We have gone into debt in order to get the academic and practical requirements. To say that men and women who worry about salary and benefits are too entitled is to ignore years of fights for fair wage. Women, who are being paid an embarrassingly lower amount than men in religious professions, need equity not guilt trips. Immigrant pastors and pastors from underrepresented racial ethnic minorities often fly below the radar of our minimum standards. Yes, some people are too entitled. When I started out, I sat in Presbytery with pastors who made ten times my salary. But until we start figuring out income inequities, we need to stop telling people that they demand too much, when we give them far too little.