

Leaning in, church style

By [Susan M. Reisert](#)

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A longtime parishioner came by to visit me in my office a few days ago. He wanted to share some complaints with me and to let me know that, though he likes me personally, he is frustrated by some of the things that I am doing at Old South (Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Hallowell, Maine). He described me as “more active” than previous pastors and struggled to find the right words to describe what he sees in what I do that he doesn’t like. If he hadn’t felt the strong urge to be so polite, he might have been compelled to use the “b” word. No, not *that* “b” word. The other “b” word: bossy.

Given what I know about many of my predecessors, I can’t imagine that I am so much more “active” in how I seek to lead the congregation. It’s just that all of my predecessors are men. I am the first woman to lead this particular congregation.

Providing pastoral leadership in a congregational church is tricky. I have very little actual power or authority. I am able to vote in only a very few contexts—in council meetings and full congregational meetings. Although I lead worship every Sunday and although I am called as “pastor and teacher,” my ability to get the congregation, and the individuals therein, to think in any particular way is limited at best.

But lead I must. I have the benefit of standing in front of the congregation every Sunday. I meet with almost all of the committees. And it’s my job to be in the office during the week and to be thinking about the church, where it’s at, and where it may be called by God to go. So, I must find a way to lead, without a whole lot of authority.

I can’t imagine that my predecessors were all passive and meek, just letting whatever happened happen without offering a guiding hand. I am sure that my male predecessors found ways of leading in this confounding context. After all, the congregation has experienced changes over the years, some of them significant changes. Those didn’t all just “happen.” I suspect that those male pastors were part

of the movement of those changes.

But that leadership is, to some extent, expected or assumed. The leadership of women, on the other hand, can be an annoyance or, worse, misguided. Not in the eyes of everyone in the congregation, but to a few. Thankfully, this one parishioner had the courage to speak to me directly, and not just complain about me in the parking lot.

I suspect that there are quite a few in the congregation who perceive my leadership style as bossy. A few assume that when I usher in a change, that even in the process of “leading,” I am betraying congregational polity. In the changes of the past that male pastors have led, I suspect that they have had their critics, and those who accused them of not being properly congregational. But I also suspect that those critics were primarily concerned with the content of the change, rather than the leadership of the pastor.

Like the men before me, in order to lead effectively, I must let go of the desire for people to like me. But one of the trickier dimensions of leading, especially in a small congregational church where most people know each other, is to try to maintain a focus on process and goals—and not on the pastor. Recently, a different parishioner has shared her criticism in a very public way. In response, a few church leaders have felt the need to come to my defense, like some sort of church-based offensive line. I remind them that I don’t need that kind of protection, that it’s more important that we stay focused on the work that we are doing. (We are in the midst of a significant new experimental governance structure.) But it can be difficult for some not to defend the pastor’s “honor,” especially when the pastor is female.

Leadership in the church is a tricky thing and for women, leadership can be especially thorny and delicate. To that parishioner who showed up in my office to complain, I freely admitted that I am “active” in my role as pastor and teacher, and that I not only believe that my predecessors were active as well, but that the church requires an active clergy in these days (in addition to an active laity). In our declining numbers, church clearly does not just “happen.” It requires thoughtfulness, attentiveness, intelligence, and leadership. Linking ourselves, deeply and lovingly, with God means knowing that we don’t ever stand still. We are always moving, growing, changing. Some of that happens through the ideas and creativity of the laity, but much of it is guided by a leader, a teacher, a pastor—of whatever gender.

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