



Straight with No Chaser: Lessons for Women Associate Clergy

By Martha Simmons

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Although I hope that men gain insight from this article, it is primarily intended for female associate clergy. There are so many lessons that I have learned in ministry; let me share some of them with you.

Lesson One: Stop whining; you made the decision and can make a new one.

As I have traveled around the country year after year preaching, teaching, lecturing, coaching, or signing books, I am always made tired by the whining from too many women in ministry I have met. They usually have one or more of the following complaints: (1) The pastor will not ordain me and it's been more than five years; (2) The pastor is always asking me to do work at the church and I have a family and a job. I do not know how I will balance doing ministry and having a family; (3) I feel so alone; (4) I can't find a mentor; (5) I do not know how I will learn to preach because I don't have any models; (6) Women don't support women; and (7)

I began ministry after 40 and I feel so far behind. I won't waste time on the other most-heard complaint: I can't find a man who will accept a woman in ministry. That one is just too tiring to address except to say, join the millions of other women in non-traditional careers.

Let me briefly address each of the main seven. First, ordination. If you are certain that you have done everything that you were told was to be done to get ordained at your church and men who did much less were ordained, and you have spoken with the pastor about it, likely repeatedly, then either accept the lack of movement and don't whine or leave without fanfare! No need to tell the rest of the membership—really, no need in person, by text, or phone! Thank the pastor for the opportunity and just leave. Yes, you may have to begin again the process that leads to ordination. Yes, you may be black-balled if your pastor is vindictive. Yes, you may have to change denominations. Yes, you may have to arrange a non-traditional ordination. However, all of this beats being disrespected and mistreated without cause, especially if you need ordination for employment purposes. I am still surprised by how long women will wait to be ordained even if they have a job pending that requires ordination. I was told by one woman who sought my help in acquiring a non-traditional ordination that when she spoke to another woman clergy about it her response was: “Well, it's been nine years for me. I think my pastor is taking his time and watching my progress.” To which the other woman responded: “Well, that may work for you, but I am not about to lose a job because some man chooses to study women forever; I bet no man in your church would wait nine years.”

Now to balancing a family, a job outside the church, and church work: Own up to decisions you've made. You chose to have a family. You chose to work outside the Church to pay your bills, and you chose to say yes to God's call. The position you are in is no different than that of women with children and husbands who choose to have high-powered corporate careers,

high-powered political careers, or careers that require long work hours. It's not that balancing a variety of stressful and difficult tasks is easy, but it is doable and has been done by so many.

Thank God you were not called to do ministry in the days of Julia Foote or Zilpha Elaw in the 1800s! Learn how to prioritize, learn that you can't have it all always, draw boundaries concerning what you will and will not do, and get some courage and just say NO!

As for feeling alone, you may well be. Ministry has its lonely moments; it goes with the territory. However, unending loneliness in ministry or in life is a choice. Anyone who wants friends must first be a friend. No, not all of your friends may understand what you have to endure in ministry. No, they may not be able to tell you what to do when the next ministry crisis occurs in your life. However, they will be there and sometimes that must be enough. I have friends who are in ministry and some who are not. I am blessed that they are just there as my friends. They inspire me, encourage me, keep me humble, make me laugh, keep me sane, and keep me going just because they are there with a listening, caring ear. It has often been the case that they were not able to do anything about whatever I was going through in ministry. However, because they were there, I was able to go through and to do what I needed to do. Find a true friend and be thankful for them.

Next, not having a mentor in ministry: If you get a good mentor in ministry, great. Please do not wear them out by being too needy and bringing constant drama about every little thing that goes against you. If you cannot find a mentor who is in ministry, take one from any arena in which you can find them. My best mentors were not in ministry! They were women and men of faith who had common sense, figured out how to succeed in their lives against great odds, and were willing to reach back and help. I coveted their advice, their patience with me, and their examples. Yes, it would have been great to have mentors who knew exactly what I was facing

and could have helped me avoid some ministry ditches, but that was not my lot. So, I took what was available and maximized it as best I could. You may have to do this too.

Now to preaching models: Do you really believe that women who have been in ministry for 30, 40, and 50 years had female preaching models? If they did, they were too few to mention, and most often they did not have regular access to them. So, how did they learn to preach? They read, they listened, they watched, they learned from men, and they experimented until they found their own voices. With all of the CDs, tapes, books, the Internet, conferences, and other events that now feature women, this is much less of an issue than in the past. But if it is an issue for you, do what women have always done—read, listen, learn from anyone from whom you can learn, experiment, and then develop your own voice. It's been done again and again. All of the women who have been in ministry more than 25 years can tell you about all the hours they spent preaching in the shower, recording themselves in their bedrooms, attending revivals (all preached by men), and taking any speaking or preaching opportunity they could get until they found their voices. We did what we had to do, and you will too if you want to learn how to be an effective preacher.

Next, women not supporting women: I have heard this and experienced it and now have some understanding of it. Yes, there are lay women in the Church who do not support women in ministry. Sometimes this is because they sincerely do not believe that women are called to preach or do any form of ministry that places them over men. Second, there are some women clergy who have been oppressed and come out of their experiences oppressing other women; oppressed men sometimes do the same thing to other men and women. It would take me at least a ream of paper to explain why the oppressed oppress. Non-supportive women exist in business, politics, the academy, and, yes, in the Church. It's a reality, so get ready for it and get over the

shock. It is what it is. However, just as there are women who will not support you, there are those who will support you inside and outside the Church. Take their support and then be a champion for other women in ministry.

Finally, what to do if you believe that you are behind in ministry. Whenever you began in ministry, that's when you began. Do yourself a favor and not waste time focusing on what can't be changed. Begin where you are. With age can come wisdom and experience that shores you up in ways that you will never fully know or appreciate. There is no rule that determines when people enter ministry. Some of the most accomplished people in the world in all fields began their work after age 50. If you began ministry in your 40s, 50s, or 60s, here are some basic tips to help you succeed in the area of ministry to which you have been called: (1) Begin by doing what you've always been good at. If you have been teaching in the Church for 10 or 20 years and you like it, at least begin in the area of Christian Education. If you have exhorted all of your life whether in the Church or elsewhere, then study preaching and don't let anyone force you into another area that you do not like under the guise of "you need to learn as much as you can about ministry." While that is true, use your common sense and begin by focusing on your area(s) of strength and familiarity. (2) Do not measure yourself against younger female or male clergy or against clergy your age who began ministry much earlier. (3) Do not waste time at a church that treats you as if you're new to the party. Yes, there will be much to learn as an older adult accepting the call to ministry. Yes, you will have to go through some of the same introductory classes and tasks that all new clergy have to do. However, give yourself credit for Church work experience and make sure that others do too. I cannot count the number of men whom I've watched begin ministry in their 40s and 50s who were once deacons, quartet singers, or even new to the faith, who are up preaching, teaching, and even pastoring in less than five years. Older

women, on the other hand, even if they have been more faithful to the faith and the Church and have developed a far more varied and competent ministry skill-set will sit in churches six or even ten years working away and never be assisted in moving forward to do what they are competent to do. That said, if you let that happen, shame on you. Stand your ground, claim your gifts, ask to be promoted, and move on if you are not being heard. It's not as if you have time to waste. (4) Do not let family slow you down. If you began ministry in your 40s, chances are that you have already sacrificed for your family. Now, let them sacrifice for you. Some family members will support you but others will continue to lean on you to keep their lives running. Unless you have young children, that is not your job. (5) Enjoy ministry. Although ministry can be difficult, tedious, and down-right heartbreaking, most often our attitudes concerning it determine what it is for us. Find ways and opportunities to laugh, celebrate, and thank God for the opportunity. Any opportunity to be of service to God is something to be celebrated. (6) Go to school no matter what and do not pick an unaccredited school. Too often women who begin ministry later in life are either drawn to or recommended to attend pitiful Bible colleges or pitiful schools of some type. Some accept this advice because they believe that they cannot measure up academically in a strong school. Perhaps you will not measure up, but how will you know if you do not try? Second, even if your academic training has been poor, that is not a reason for you to fail to attempt to become stronger academically. Just start where you are. You may need to begin online, with weekend classes, or with a writing tutor; just do not accept mediocrity at any age. (7) Get and or stay fit. Whatever you do, get and maintain a good exercise regimen. This will increase your ability to think clearly, it will make you feel better, and you will appreciate having done this for yourself. Too many older women in ministry are grossly overweight! Change what you eat, begin walking, get a trainer, do whatever is necessary to get fit. Everyone is living

longer. Fifty is the new 40, 60 is the new 50, and 70 is the new 60. So if you begin taking care of yourself, you'll likely find that although you thought you were behind and would only have a short career in ministry, instead, before you know it, you'll have reached 20 or more great years of service in ministry. Don't waste any of this time—embrace it with gusto.

Lesson Two: Female associate clergy have it harder than male associate clergy.

Face it: Associate clergy are often under the auspices of senior pastors who are ill-equipped to train associate clergy and consider allowing them to do whatever grunt work that needs to be done at a church as training them. This is true for male and female associate clergy. Also, a lot of senior pastors expect women to accept grunt work more graciously and for longer periods than they do male associate clergy. In case you didn't know, we live in a patriarchal society. Women in America (of all races) still earn less than men, are charged more for cars and dry-cleaning, are promoted slower than men, bear the brunt of child-rearing responsibilities even when married, and the list goes on and on.

All that said, it is up to you to make choices that will make your life easier—maybe not easy, but easier. For instance, join a church where the pastor at least has a reputation for supporting women and helping them get paid jobs in ministry. Also, go to seminary and beyond so that you are more likely to gain well-paying employment in a church, the academy, or elsewhere and/or in order to put yourself in position to begin your own ministry. Further, accept that you may have to do non-traditional ministry to fulfill your calling and pay your bills. Finally, learn the difference between being faithful to a senior pastor and being a door mat. Most of the thousands of sane women I have met in ministry were willing to work harder as associate clergy, performed grunt work with a more gracious spirit, were better trained and more humble, and were competent in many more areas of ministry than most of the thousands of male associate

clergy I have met. However, the women were rarely compensated and were rarely assisted in gaining employment or hired by the senior pastors or churches for which they served. Why? At least two reasons. One, people know a sucker when they see one. What do I mean by this? I mean that almost anyone who knows that you will work for free year after year without even a thank you most often will let you do it. So, if you have agreed to be a door mat, admit it; this is a choice you made and one you can change. However, if you choose not to change it, stop whining about it.

The second reason that women have it harder in ministry is due to patriarchy and the oppressor mentality at work in the case of some female senior pastors. There are patriarchal men that will always give deference to men. Some of them will tell you otherwise (especially those who have graduated from seminary), but actions speak louder than words. Then, as I indicated earlier, there are women who have been oppressed who become oppressors; these women will never be friends of other women in ministry.

All that said, women have it harder in ministry just as they do in society generally. So, be sure that you are part of the solution, not part of the problem. Stand up for yourself. Hone your gifts. Be prepared for doors that open, and when there are not doors, go through the window, or if necessary, create your own building. Finally, never become what you hate.