

## Is your congregation ready for a woman in the pastorate?

The Church needs the tenacity, wisdom, innovation, and compassion that women in ministry have to offer. Time and again, though, women hear that churches are not ready for them, or these clergy realize *after* accepting ministry positions that congregations had misjudged their own preparedness. The ramifications for this miscalculation are huge. If a clergywoman is not successful because of the church's failure to lay groundwork, that congregation often hesitates before calling another woman instead of examining its own assumptions, thus missing out on deeply-needed gifts and perspectives. Additionally, that pastor might begin to question her effectiveness and call rather than her fit with the context, possibly leaving the ministry for good and ensuring that no church benefits from all she has to offer.

The following pages are an assessment to help measure a church's true openness to a pastor who also happens to be a woman. (Thank you to alumnae of Young Clergy Women International for their input on the assessment.) Here are ways you can use it:

- ◇ **Churches in pastor searches.** This assessment provides a readiness test for calling a clergywoman.
- ◇ **Churches with settled pastors.** This assessment can translate into action steps for lay leaders and current pastors. (The "getting ready," after all, doesn't just happen. It takes intentional work. And if your church is not willing to do this work, spend some time mulling the reasons why and praying about them.) Even congregations that think they are ready to receive a clergywoman – including those who have or had women clergy – could benefit from working through the points above. Often moderate to progressive churches think they are more welcoming than they actually are.
- ◇ **Clergywomen.** Use this assessment in your call processes to help gauge whether a congregation might be a good fit.
- ◇ **Judicatory bodies.** Use this assessment to help congregations and search teams work through the steps needed to set up the possibility for long and fruitful ministries between churches and clergywomen.

Note that some aspects of this assessment can potentially be adapted for considering a church's preparedness to be led by a pastor who would be another kind of "first," though there would be additional work specific to the variety of first. Often a candidate will be more than one kind of first, making it essential for a church to take readiness steps in multiple areas.

This welcoming work is worthy of intentionality and intense listening to the movements of the Holy Spirit, and not just because of the clergyperson in question. This attentiveness and the resulting actions can lead to increased connectedness among all the people involved as well as between the people and God.

### **Pre-pastor search work:**

- ⇒ The church has had a woman in its pulpit as a guest preacher, and it referred to her sermon as such rather than as a “talk” or a “devotional.”
- ⇒ Church leadership has discussed any members’ protest (such as staying home from worship or walking out before the sermon) of inviting a woman to guest preach and publicly re-affirmed support of the preacher.
- ⇒ The church has had women in significant lay leadership roles (elder, deacon, warden, clerk of session, moderator, etc.) and has worked through any conflict that arose as a result of their election/selection.
- ⇒ The church has eliminated exclusively male pronouns/descriptors on its website and in its social media.
- ⇒ The church regularly uses curricula or other materials written by women (e.g., seminary professors, pastors) with theological authority.

### **Pre-interview pastor search work:**

- ⇒ The pastor search team is representative of the demographics and commitments of the congregation as whole, thus making it better able to reflect accurately the fullness of the church’s story to ministerial candidates.
- ⇒ The pastor search team has structured its work so that it is rooted in listening deeply to God’s guidance.
- ⇒ The pastor search team has discussed its assumptions and the congregation’s about a great-fit pastor, probing the reasons behind them.
- ⇒ Having surfaced these assumptions, the search team has named specific competencies (rather than personality traits) as the criteria for a great-fit pastor.
- ⇒ In communications with the congregation, the pastor search team has helped the church broaden its imagination about a great-fit pastor.

- ⇒ The pastor search team has eliminated exclusively male pronouns/descriptors for the hoped-for pastor in all search team documents (e.g., position description, position advertisements, church profile).
- ⇒ The church as a whole has earnestly prayed that God will lead it to the best-fit ministerial candidate, no matter how that candidate might differ from church members' expectations.
- ⇒ The pastor search team members have covenanted to run all questions to and about candidates through the filter of "Would we ask this of a male candidate?" (Examples of questions to be sifted out: "Who will watch your children while you're working?" and "How will your spouse's employment affect your ability to move here/stay here for a long time?")

### **Interview/call phase pastor search work:**

- ⇒ The pastor search team is aware of and open with all candidates about potential challenges that await.
- ⇒ With all candidates the pastor search team inquires about the needs of the candidate's family to ensure hospitable on-site visits, and later, to help integrate the incoming pastor's family into the life of the congregation (to the extent the family desires).
- ⇒ The church leadership has discussed the possibility of conflict arising from calling a woman (noting that this conflict might come disguised as an issue about something else) and is prepared to stand behind the candidate of choice/incoming pastor.