

# The Uphill Battle Women in Ministry Must Still Fight

“You’re a what?”

“I’m a pastor,” I responded to the blank stare of a woman who lived in my neighborhood.

After 30 seconds of dead silence, I said, “I’m a preacher.”

I concluded trying to connect to her. “I work at a church.”

“Oh, I’ve never seen a woman preacher before,” she responded.

“Yeah, I get that a lot,” I said with a smile.

Our conversation veered to raising toddlers and our boys’ latest shenanigans, but the interaction left me wondering how much longer I would have these exact same conversations.

I have been a pastor for four years, and yet the response to my identification as a pastor who happens to be a woman hasn’t changed in that time period.

I understood exactly where she was coming from. I had grown up with similar ideas that women couldn’t be pastors or preachers.

It wasn’t until I met my husband that I knew there were Baptists who welcomed and affirmed women in ministry.

It was an exciting and life-changing revelation. Our conversations and his encouragement led me to give words to a call that lay deep in my spirit. I was called to preach.

This revelation was quickly accompanied by the understanding that while I was in

a fellowship who welcomed and affirmed women in ministry, it was not a community devoid of sexual harassment, sexual assault and sexual abuse.

As I began pulpit supply and working in churches, I began to receive unwanted comments like:

“You’re the cutest preacher I’ve ever seen.”

“Wow, I’m glad you’re wearing a robe today or I wouldn’t be able to concentrate on your sermon at all.”

“The only comment I have is that you should wear a longer skirt next time,” when I was wearing a knee-length skirt.

None of these comments are remotely related to my work as a minister or my preaching. All of them center around my appearance. All of them have an uncomfortable sexual undertone.

To be a woman in ministry in a Baptist denomination that only has [6.5 percent of pastors and co-pastors](#) who are female is to fight an uphill battle.

You are not ever just a pastor or preacher, you are always a woman who is a pastor or preacher, which means that you are dealing with the language patterns and boundary crossing of a culture filled with sexual harassment, sexual abuse and sexual assault.

I quickly learned there was a back channel among women in ministry of people who were supporters and people to avoid.

I learned there was a way to break a hug in the greeting line after preaching when someone wouldn’t let go, but I also learned that sharing too much of my experiences fell into “things we don’t talk about” because [church attendance](#) and budgets are falling.

Church leaders and churches have fallen into the pattern of running away from

issues of sexual harassment, sexual assault and sexual abuse within their congregations and within their congregants' stories.

By pretending as if these stories and this pain will blow over, church leaders and churches are heaping spiritual abuse on top of the sexual abuse.

Their distance and refusal to meet these issues head on communicate a distant and cold-hearted god. Yet, the psalmist reminds us God draws near to the brokenhearted and saves those crushed in spirit (Psalm 34:1).

God sent God's own son, Jesus, who challenged the power of the religious leaders of the first century and so too challenges religious leaders and churches of today.

We can't ignore the devastating reality that sexual harassment, sexual assault and sexual abuse have occurred in our communities of faith. We must listen to the voices of #churchtoo, so that we can sit with the least of these just as Jesus did.

It took me a long time to tell even part of my story of sexual harassment and spiritual abuse.

The wound was beyond the physical. It pierced my soul and was too tender to expose, but as the #churchtoo and #metoo movements reveal, these stories are much too prevalent not to be shared and heard.

Now that our eyes have been opened to the truth that sexual harassment, sexual assault and sexual abuse are a part of our communities of faith, we must also recognize the spiritual abuse layered on top that has hidden and silenced this abuse.

The work it will take to heal ourselves and heal our churches is daunting and intimidating, but the light and wholeness that will come could just change the world.

*[Merianna Harrelson](#) is pastor of [New Hope Christian Fellowship](#) in West Columbia, South Carolina, and editor-in-chief of [Harrelson Press Publishing](#). Her*

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writings also appear on her [website](#), and you can follow her on Twitter [@MeriannaNeely](#).

*Editor's note: This article is part of a series on women in ministry. Previous articles in the series are:*

[How Churches Can Stop Stunting Women Called to Ministry](#) by Tambi Swiney

[2 Women, Different Centuries, Aid Women Preachers](#) by Pam Durso