

Who Will Ordain Pastor Jane?

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It's a beautiful summer evening in the city. Traffic is uncharacteristically heavy around the large, downtown church. Parking lots are overflowing and vehicles of every description line the surrounding streets. A lone patrolman is observing from a distance the quiet gathering outside the church whose signs express respectful disagreement with the evening's activities. Inside the sanctuary, the congestion continues as attendees occupy every available seat and late-comers find themselves standing in order to witness the ordination service which is scheduled to begin soon. As the procession of ordinands enters the sanctuary, a hush falls over the assembled and all attention is focused on only one of the small group.

On this night, Jane Doe is among those processing as she represents the first female to receive the laying on of hands reserved for those being ordained in this denomination. For many denominations, their 'Jane' is a part of their history, a distant memory of just such an evening long ago. Meanwhile, for other denominations, 'Jane' represents nothing more than an avatar of what will never be. Readers who expect this post to argue for or against the ordination of women in ministry may be disappointed. Instead, I take this opportunity to share two personal observations of women such as Jane I have encountered in my ministry and pose several important questions.

The women in ministry I have encountered typically represent two unique ministry styles. On the one hand, there are those whose calling to the ministry appears to be closely linked to a parallel 'calling' to advocate for one or more social issues. The heart of the Gospel they proclaim is a Social Gospel as they seek to disseminate their understanding of the social evils they perceive in today's world and the solutions they espouse. Their ministry often leads them to venues of service beyond the local church such as denominational boards and agencies or parachurch organizations. On the other hand, there are those whose ministry represents the epitome of compassionate care-giving to the souls they are called to shepherd. I have seen many churches vehemently protest the appointment of a female pastor to their pulpit and, years later, more fervently protest her departure. In shepherding those entrusted to her pastoral care, a female pastor's gifts and graces often surpasses those of her male peers and serves as an example worth emulating.

While the ordination of women is a relatively recent paradigm shift in the practice of most denominations, the act of ordaining or 'commissioning' female officers into the ministry is a longstanding practice in the Salvation Army. Together with their husbands, and in recent years as single officers, women have been ordained to the ministry of this denomination throughout its history. Unlike women in many denominations whose leadership in the church is severely limited, female officers in the Salvation Army are treated as partners in ministry with their husbands and peers of both genders. Areas of leadership and responsibility are typically limited only by their giftedness and experience. One female officer explained her thoughts on her ordination to ministry alongside her husband, 'It's nice to be recognized for my contribution to our shared ministry.'

In recent years, an increasing number of women have served in positions of leadership in the workplace, in the military, and in government. In the last presidential election cycle, the participation of Hillary Clinton and Sarah Palin in the process, and the fervor of those who supported them, reflects the openness of those of diverse political persuasions to women in leadership positions. It can be argued that the Church represents the last arena in today's society in which the leadership of women is openly challenged. Only as those with opposing views learn to understand each other's perspective through inquiring and honest dialogue can differences be fully understood and, where possible, differences reconciled.

Is it time for churches and denominations who espouse opposing views on the ordination of women to actively engage in such dialogue? Is it time for church and denominational leaders to consider the

implications of opposing the leadership of women in the church alongside the openness of most who occupy the pews to accept female leadership outside the church? In the midst of the prevalence of females in leadership positions throughout society today, is it time for some bodies of today's Church to reconsider their stance on the question, ?Who will ordain Pastor Jane??