

Why We Need Women in the Pulpit

I was ordained to the priesthood in the Episcopal Church (in 2003). When the service concluded I was greeting people in the shaking hands line and a family of four (mom, dad and two little girls) came up and the mom said, "I know we don't know each other. I hope it's okay that we came. We wanted our girls to see this and know that they can do anything." –the Rev. Kedron Nicholson, an Episcopal priest

Role models matter.

Research has consistently shown that positive adult role models can contribute to the health, education and overall well-being of young people. Albert Bandura has argued that children learn how to "perform" adult roles by observing the behavior of prominent adults in their lives and trying to imitate it.

Other research has shown that this is especially the case when it comes to learning gender roles. When children see a behavior modeled exclusively by men or by women, they internalize that behavior as distinctly masculine or feminine. The more children see positions of power occupied only by men, the more they come to think of leadership as an exclusively masculine role. As leaders occupy a place of higher social status, this can implicitly generate an association between gender, leadership and self-confidence.

In our new book, "She Preached the Word: Women's Ordination in Modern America" (Oxford University Press), we ask whether the presence of prominent female religious congregational leaders in the lives of girls and young women affects their self-worth and empowerment later in life. According to the General Social Survey, 9 out of 10 Americans report attending religious

services at least occasionally in their youth. This means that places of worship are a key setting in which children and young people have the opportunity to observe leadership in action.

To investigate this question, we fielded a nationally representative telephone and internet survey in 2016, supplemented with dozens of in-person qualitative interviews. In all, we surveyed over 800 American worshippers (those who say that they attend religious services at least “seldom”) and asked how often the religious leaders they had growing up were men or women, as well as whether their most influential congregational leader was a man or a woman.

One of our most striking findings is that women who had female congregational leaders in their youth enjoyed higher levels of self-esteem as adults.

Women who said they never had a female religious leader growing up were 10 percent less likely to agree that they “have high self-esteem” as adults, and 30 percent less likely to “strongly” agree, compared with women who had female clergy at least “some of the time.” (The same was not true for men. Men who had never had a female pastor or priest growing up had levels of self-esteem just as high as those who did.)

This is important because low self-esteem has been linked to higher levels of depression and anxiety as well as lower levels of relationship success, job satisfaction and motivation for personal improvement.

It is also important because women, on average, consistently report lower levels of self-esteem than men. In our research, we found that this was the case only for the 60 percent or so of people who reported that they never had a female religious leader growing up. When women had female clergy at least “some of the time” in their congregations while growing up, their reported levels of self-esteem were consistently just as high

as men's.

That's not all. We also found that the gap in full-time employment between men and women was present only among those whose most influential youth congregational leader was a man. Women whose most influential leader growing up was a woman were equally likely to be employed full time as men.

Further, women in our survey whose most influential leader was a woman had gained, on average, a full additional year of education compared with those whose most influential leader was a man. All of these results held true even when controlling for a variety of other potential mitigating factors, including demographics and individual/family socioeconomic background.

In our survey, at least, the gender gap in psychological and economic empowerment was present only among those whose religious congregational leaders growing up were exclusively men.

To us, this strongly suggests that the rarity of female clergy in America's places of worship is at least partially to blame for the contemporary gender gap in American society. Increasing the proportion of women in America's pulpits would not only improve women's psychological well-being, but would also likely help close the gender gap in the workplace and other positions of societal leadership. {eo}

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