

Women Rising to Prominence in the Pulpit

Chicago. New York. Washington, D.C. In quick succession this year, three women have been chosen to lead historic tall-steeple churches in all these cities.

In May, the Rev. Shannon Johnson Kershner became the first woman solo senior pastor at Chicago's Fourth Presbyterian Church. In June, the Rev. Amy Butler was elected senior pastor of New York City's Riverside Church. And finally, in July, the Rev. Ginger Gaines-Cirelli began leading Foundry United Methodist Church in Washington, D.C.

"For women to speak in those pulpits and speak boldly as public voices in these very public buildings is very powerful," said the Rev. Serene Jones, president of Union Theological Seminary, who recently hosted a dinner party with some of New York's movers and shakers to welcome Butler to town.

It's been 40 years since the Episcopal Church first ordained women, and other denominations have long included women in their clergy ranks. But these new advances are occurring sooner in the lives of these three women than some of their older counterparts. The Hartford Institute for Religion Research reports that women clergy are much more likely to serve in smaller congregations.

Scholar Diana Butler Bass hailed the arrival of these women—all in their 40s and leading large, urban, neo-Gothic churches—but also wondered if they reflect the "General Motors phenomenon."

"Are women coming into leadership only as the institutions are collapsing?" asked Bass, author of *Christianity After Religion*.

"Now that they're in crisis, it's almost like the men are moving out and, 'Oh well, we'll just leave it to the women.' Then if the church doesn't succeed, then it's the woman's fault. It's a kind of a double-edged sword."

Gaines-Cirelli, 44, doesn't view it that way.

"I think there are challenges and I think that we face them and I think that the fact that women are being counted among those who are capable of facing those challenges at the highest level is a very positive sign," said the native Oklahoman.

Sociologist of religion Cynthia Woolever said the movement of first-career women to these significant sanctuaries is occurring in the isolated realm of mainline Protestantism, where about 20 percent of congregations are led by clergywomen.

"If you look at conservative Protestant churches you find very few; in the Catholic church: zero," said Woolever, editor of *The Parish Paper*, a newsletter for regional offices of mainline denominations.

"It's wonderful that women are being given those kinds of opportunities to serve in those very large churches, but it's a very small slice of the pie."

All three of the senior pastors have had to jump gender-specific hurdles.

In June, Butler used the hashtag "nevergetsold" when she tweeted about how a funeral director didn't believe she was a minister. She once had to get an emergency room security guard to log on to her former church's website to show him her photo there so she could pay a late-night visit to a sick congregant.

"Look, I know you're his girlfriend," the guard told her

before she convinced him otherwise.

Kershner said that early in her ministry when she was a hospital chaplain, she often entered rooms where she was rebuffed because she wasn't a "real minister."

In every place she's served as the first woman pastor, Gaines-Cirelli has heard a variation on this theme: "I was so worried that we were getting a woman, but I think that you're going to be just fine."

Comparable pay was yet another hurdle.

But both Butler and Len Leach, chair of Riverside's church council, said the pastor's base salary of \$250,000 is equivalent to that received by her predecessor, the Rev. Brad Braxton.

"It is a big job and for me it's a big, wonderful opportunity and a big risk and so I think the Riverside Church has really stepped out here to set a great example for the rest of Christendom," said Butler, a native Hawaiian who will lead a majority black congregation.

Butler described her total package, including benefits, as "fair." Leach said Butler decided to give \$35,000 annually to the interdenominational church's general fund and an additional \$26,000 as a scholarship to pay the annual tuition of a student at the church's day school.

Kershner and Gaines-Cirelli also said they are paid fairly.

All three women are not only leading congregations but staffs that include other female clergy. Riverside's staff has four other women clergy, Fourth Church has three female associate pastors, and Foundry has one female associate pastor as well as a woman executive pastor.

"The truth is that for years, it was all men; in some places it still is and nobody bats an eye," said Gaines-Cirelli. "So

the fact that we are live-streaming to the world this other vision is kind of powerful.”

Foundry member Leo Lawless agreed.

“It’s about time, isn’t it?” he said, noting that a recent worship service featured Gaines-Cirelli and two other women clergy, and two female acolytes as well as a laywoman who read the Scriptures.

The three senior clergywomen each say they look forward to the day when they’re viewed simply as their congregation’s pastor, rather than its woman pastor.

Said Kershner: “My hope is that little boys and little girls see me and the other clergy and think if that’s something that they say and others think God’s calling them to do, then they can do it.”

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