

## Best Foot Forward in a Polished Shoe: How Women Can Best Represent Themselves as Rising Leaders

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When I was a seminarian, one of my beloved mentors told me the story of her first Sunday as an ordained minister serving in a congregation: she had carefully prepared her sermon, she made sure her vestments were pressed. Throughout the service, she was poised and led well. At the end of the service, someone whom she greeted at the end of the service had only one comment: her pumps could have used a little more polish. Decades later, she chuckled as she told this story – but she told the story to the women she was training for a reason: she wanted us to know how carefully we would be evaluated, from the cut of our hair to the tips of our shoes.

As a canon-to-the-ordinary and transition ministry officer, I often engage with clergy and lay people around the question of leadership during times of transition. Therefore, my response to questions about how women can best represent themselves as rising leaders are shaped by walking with people through the process of finding new positions. It is important to note, however, that women must be thinking about representing themselves as rising leaders *not only* when seeking a new position, but also *starting now*, in the contexts where they are currently ministering.

Though we do not like it, and though it is not ‘fair,’ women are often held to higher and to additional standards than our male counterparts. At a practical level, the question is: how do we deal with this without losing our minds, without damage to our spirits? I believe that in order for us to represent ourselves well as the professional, deeply spiritual, profoundly passionate people we are, we must do three things well:

1. The spiritual discipline of knowing ourselves
2. The task of doing our homework
3. The skill of practicing gentle, good-humored redirection

The spiritual discipline of knowing oneself is the foundation of ministry. What are your goals? What are your aspirations? What do you feel called to achieve? In what kind of role can you reach these goals and fulfill these aspirations? Who are you as a child of God? How do you keep that in the forefront of your life and work? Women in American culture have traditionally been coached not to have aspirations of their own but, rather, to fulfill the aspirations of their family and/or community. Women cannot represent themselves well in job interviews and leadership roles if they cannot clearly respond to the questions: “*who are you?*” AND “*what do you hope to achieve?*” When a woman can do this, the process of “knowing what you should do,” “getting a job” or, as we like to say in Episcopal circles, “finding a calling” becomes a real and mutual discernment process. Of course, one may not always have the option of holding out for one’s “dream job,” but if a woman knows herself and can identify the parts of herself that are left unfulfilled by a particular role, she may be able to make adjustments elsewhere in life if necessary so she can continue to grow and to live joyfully.

The task of doing your homework is essential to ministering well. A woman cannot minister well over the long haul if her basic needs are not met and/or if she is being treated unfairly. Before taking on any leadership role, before applying for any job, (or before making significant changes in a current role) one must learn the answers to some key questions: What are the expectations and scope of the job? What is the context of this ministry? Who are the people with whom you will be working, what is important to them, and how do they demonstrate mutual commitment to the ministry? What resources (financial and otherwise) are available for the ministry . . . including the salary you be paid? Learning thoroughgoing answers to these questions is a huge investment of time and energy, and . . .

In addition to learning what those involved in the congregation/organization think about these things, there is yet more one needs to know: Are other clergy in similar roles in that region expected to do similar things? Do people in the larger community understand the context in the same way the congregation/organization does? Would people in the community say the same things about the organization that the organization says about themselves? Who controls the resources that are available, and what are the community expectations of how those resources are being, and will be, used? On what basis has the salary package for the position been decided? How does it compare to the salaries of others (female *and male*) with similar roles in that region? What commitment has the congregation/organization made to parity and to merit-based pay? The task of doing your homework will likely be both dispiriting and liberating. It will also undergird a decision-making process that will allow ministry to flourish.

The skill of gentle, good-humored redirection will serve women well as they seek to clearly articulate themselves and their goals, and as they ask questions that unveil realities in their context. Often, people are surprised, embarrassed or intimidated when women “put themselves out there,” when women share their aspirations and/or challenge the status quo. If a woman cannot help people recover from the shock or embarrassment that arises, or if she gets pulled into quibbling over who “knows the facts,” the conversation will swing away from engagement with the things that matter most. Gentle, good-humored redirection includes practices of reconnection, e.g. acknowledging that the topic is challenging, identifying a small point of agreement, changing the pace of the conversation, or lingering for a moment on something amusing. These points of redirection serve as hinges that can bring people back around to engagement with you as you continue to focus on key issues they might rather avoid.

My mentor was not telling her female mentees the story of her unpolished pumps in the hope that we would become hyper-self-conscious. She was telling us this story in the hope that we would learn to laugh at ourselves – and be prepared to meet the challenge of keeping ourselves and others focused on what is really important – not by trying to become perfect, but by refusing to be surprised or upset when people talk about our shoes rather than about our sermon. My great hope is that women will rise in leadership as we remain undeterred in knowing ourselves, doing our homework, and persist in redirecting attention to the essentials of ministry.