

A woman's guide to getting coffee

By [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

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I was reading this article in the NYT, entitled, "[Madam, CEO, Get Me a Coffee.](#)" And it says a lot of the things that we have been reading and experiencing for decades about women. The workplace responds differently to the ways women work, and especially when it comes to staying late and helping others. This is particularly true for our work in the church. Being a pastor can be a helping profession in the most beautiful sort of way. We are servant-leaders. But for many women, having a servant's heart can undermine what we're trying to accomplish as leaders.

Now. I am anticipating in my mind the there will be men reading this article who will want to tell me that I don't really understand the gospel of Jesus Christ. But, of course, in a lot of settings in our society, women are seen as servants (not as leaders), so we need a bit of a corrective on the other side.

When men give instruction to their friends, they are good leaders. When women give instruction to their friends, we are [bossy](#). In classes in seminary, I would raise my hand for an entire hour, and never be called upon once. When I talked in class, I heard, "Could we please let someone else ask a question?" Like I was trying to suck everyone's oxygen out of the room, instead of being a student, who paid money for courses and had every right to ask a question.

In business meetings, I still have difficulty getting businessmen to make eye contact with me when they are making a pitch, even when I am the one awarding the contract. When we gather as clergy, I watch men interrupt and over-explain things to women, even when the women have twice the experience.

To make things even trickier, women are entering into a man's profession. Not just in the sense that men have traditionally had these positions, but in the sense that most Christians still think it's a sin for us to be clergy at all.

All of this to say, we have been socialized differently. While a man might need to be reminded of the servant part of servant-leader, because he has been socialized to be dominant, women sometimes have to remember the leader part of the dynamic. It's

all very tricky. And, of course, navigating it depends on your particular personality and comfort level. These are three simply suggestions that I try to abide by, usually, depending on the circumstances.

1) Getting the coffee. In our society, fetching coffee is often an unintended power play. As a pastor, I have had other male pastors lean over, touch my arm, and ask, “Honey, could you get me some coffee?” Those are the times when I know the request is not about the coffee.

I laugh hardily and say, “You know, I can’t get that right now, but feel free to help yourself.”

This is trickier than it seems. Because coffee is not only a power play, but it’s also a sign of hospitality. It’s how we greet one another, especially in church.

So what do we do? If at all possible, do not ever learn how to use the coffeemaker. In one church, I went seven years in ignorant bliss. If we have an office manager, many of us don’t want to demean that person either. But we can make sure that it’s part of the job description. If you’re an associate, starting out in a new job, and the Senior Pastor expects you to be the coffee gopher, then you might have to have an uncomfortable conversation. If you’re a Senior, please stop expecting this from your colleagues.

Another thing I have noticed is that male pastors take lead me to the maker, and invite me to make my own coffee, so that I get the cream/sugar combination correct. Many of them have those [one-cup makers](#). They instruct me on how it works, and then invite me to do it.

2) Contributing to the potluck. It takes a long time to make a meal for a potluck, and the meals are usually after the service. We don’t have time to make a dish if we are preparing for Sunday morning. Chances are the male pastors weren’t expected to contribute, or they had a spouse who made the meal. If you don’t have a willing spouse, you don’t need to contribute. There were times when my husband was able to make something, but if he wasn’t up for it, I went to the potluck empty-handed.

When people talked (and, yes, they talked), I would laugh and say, “Oh no, I didn’t bring a dish to the potluck, but I brought a sermon to the service!” Believe me, they would miss the sermon more than they’ll miss the appearance of another green bean casserole. And you simply cannot do everything.

3) Moderating your voice. I began preaching when I was about 26. I received complaints almost constantly about my voice. I do, indeed, have a nasally voice. But there were many times when complaints were relentless. In one church, it was suggested that we change the sound system (I'm not sure why... were they going to add auto-tune?). I tried to do what I could. I care about the art of preaching. I even sought out voice lessons (they were useless).

Like so many things, it's hard to know when it's a valid complaint or just a plain insult. [This American Life](#) made it clearer to me. In part two, they talked about how we have pathologized "vocal fry," when it's just basically people being annoyed with young women's voices. So NPR journalists have the same issues? It's not just me? My friends, this opened my eyes.