

Women explain things

By [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

September 16, 2013

At the end of the service, I saw a young woman leaving the sanctuary. “Hi,” I said, and held my breath a second until I asked, “Are you a visitor?” I’ve only worshiped with the congregation for four Sundays, so I don’t have a good handle on who’s new and who’s not.

“Yes, it’s my first time here,” she answered.

“Wonderful! How did you find out about us?”

“You’re PC(USA). There aren’t a lot of PC(USA) churches here.”

“Yeah,” I nodded. “It’s important.” I looked down at my robe, thankful—once again—for my denomination’s insistence on women’s leadership.

The religious landscape in Chattanooga is interesting. It may be a magnified version of what’s happening in a lot of places. There are many culturally hip churches that are utterly regressive when it comes to women. In our city, the number of PC(USA)’s are in the minority. That means that many Presbyterians in our town don’t allow women to be deacons, elders, or pastors. This is a University town with strong women in business ownership and non-profits leadership. I’ve met amazing women activists. It’s important for women to be in religious leadership.

I know that it probably sounds ridiculous for many people to be even talking about women in the pulpit. Our denomination has been recognizing women in leadership since 1893. In 1956, it became official in our polity. But in most denominational churches, there is a shortage of positions available. Many Associate Pastor positions are being cut—which means that many positions that women held are disappearing. It’s been 57 years, but hiring a man can still be a default in many church cultures. With this shortage, it’s a good time to remember what a gift it is to have women as pastors. In the large spectrum of Christianity, it’s a rare pocket in which we can exist.

Also, it's important that women explain things—especially when it comes to religion. If you spend time on the Internet, you probably know the term “mansplaining”-- when men explain things to women without acknowledging their intelligence, knowledge, or familiarity with subject matter (thanks to [Policymic](#) for the definition). Religion has had a pretty [devastating history](#) of mansplaining. In fact, if I were writing a dictionary entry for mansplaining, I would include [this photo](#).

What are these religious men explaining to Congress? Birth control. Even though not one of them has taken one of those pretty pink pills, they are the experts on the subject.

“But wait!” One might protest, “The issue was not birth control. It was freedom of religion!”

And I wonder, *why can't women talk about freedom of religion?* Women can explain things.

The issue goes farther than health care. I have been working on [this little book on peace](#), doing a lot of studying on domestic violence. One in every four women in our country has been a victim of domestic violence, and one in every six has been victim of sexual assault. There are a lot of factors in a woman getting out of difficult situations—one major factor is that she is believed. Often that trust comes from a supportive church. People who make it a habit to believe women.

It can be a rare thing for a woman to be believed, without question. As [Rebecca Solnit's story](#) reminds us:

Credibility is a basic survival tool. When I was very young and just beginning to get what feminism was about and why it was necessary, I had a boyfriend whose uncle was a nuclear physicist. One Christmas, he was telling—as though it were a light and amusing subject—how a neighbor's wife in his suburban bomb-making community had come running out of her house naked in the middle of the night screaming that her husband was trying to kill her. How, I asked, did you know that he wasn't trying to kill her? He explained, patiently, that they were respectable middle-class people. Therefore, her-husband-trying-to-kill-her was simply not a credible explanation for her fleeing the house yelling that her husband was trying to kill her. That she was crazy, on the other hand....

The robes, collars and pulpits--whatever you might think of them--they are symbols of trust and authority that have been passed down from generation to generation in our culture. When women step into them, we remind ourselves and others that women can explain things.