

What do you do?

By [Joanna Harader](#)

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“So, Joanna, what do you do?”

My comfort level with this question depends on the context. In this case, I was at a neighborhood get-together with several new neighbors I didn't know very well. The 79-year-old man asking the question is active in a local conservative independent evangelical church. The 60ish-year-old man also listening in attends the Wesleyan church and home schooled his children. And there I sat, on the couch, nursing my plate of Chex mix.

I was kind of hoping everyone would assume I was a stay-at-home mom and avoid this question all together. (OK, not really.)

“What do you do?”

“I'm pastor of the Mennonite church in town.”

I throw in the *Mennonite* because that usually distracts people from the fact that I'm a woman *pastor*. “Oh, Mennonites! You drive a car? You don't look like a Mennonite. What do Mennonites believe? I just love this little Mennonite bakery we went to on vacation. . . .”

But this guy was not phased by the pastor or the Mennonite part of my response. “Oh,” he said, “my pastor is part of an evangelical pastors group in town. Do you go to that?”

“Well,” I replied, “as a woman pastor I'm not really welcome in that group.”

The truth is, I don't get out in mixed company very much. I haven't developed socially appropriate filters (maybe I should run for president!), and the words just came out of my mouth before I realized that a simple “no” would have sufficed.

I did not want to create an uncomfortable silence or start a theological argument. But I was surprised that my statement didn't even seem to register with the two

men. The conversation quickly and easily flowed on to another topic. My husband later confirmed what I suspected: I was the only person in the room who felt at all uncomfortable with our host's question and my honest response.

At the time I was relieved. But the more I think about it, the more it bothers me. Because those two men should have had an opinion about my exclusion from the group that both of their pastors are part of. They could have said, "Well, yes. Our church doesn't believe women should be pastors, so that makes sense." Or, "Hmm. I know the Wesleyan denomination supports women in ministry. I wonder why my pastor is in a group that doesn't." Or, "That's terrible! How can those misogynistic pigs call themselves ministers of the gospel?"

But instead of an exclamation or a question, there was silence on the topic of their pastors' exclusively male pastor group. The silence could have meant that my neighbors agree with the position of the evangelical pastors: that women are—that *I am*—not qualified by God to be a pastor. Their silence could have meant that they affirmed me in my role as pastor but did not want to speak ill of their own pastors. Their silence could have meant that the entire question of whether or not women should be pastors was completely new to them and they didn't know what to think about it. It could have meant that they were multiplying decimals in their heads and didn't hear a word I said.

I don't know these neighbors well enough to say what was behind the silence. But I can say what was *not* behind the silence. The silence contained no accountability for the oppressive teachings of their faith communities. The silence offered no invitation to talk about points of disagreement within our shared faith. The silence contained no acknowledgment of the pain and frustration and struggle behind my words: "I'm not welcome in that group."

Would I have enjoyed having Paul quoted at me on an otherwise pleasant Friday evening? Not particularly. But really, if those men are OK with the sexism of their pastors, I would hope they have a theological reason for their complicity—even if that theology is based on lazy biblical interpretation. Because to be complicit in sexism that they don't condone . . . that's worse than lazy biblical interpretation; that's lazy living.

"So, Joanna, what do you do?"

Well, apparently I speak awkward truths in tenuous social situations. Whether anyone acknowledges them or not.

*Originally posted at [Spacious Faith](#)*