



BY JEANNE ZIMMERLY JANTZI

# Good intentions aren't enough

## Men can dismantle patriarchy with actions that support women in leadership

**T**HREE YEARS AGO, when I started my practice as a process consultant, I wondered if I could ever shake free of the *Anabaptist World* article that potential clients often found when they googled my name.

*Above left:* Jeanne Zimmerly Jantzi and Joel Gaines (joining virtually) lead a seminar on “The Messy Struggle of Antiracism” at the Mennonite Church USA convention in Cincinnati in 2021.

COURTESY OF JEANNE ZIMMERLY JANTZI

*Above right:* Ohio Mennonite Conference credentialed leaders participate in strategic planning discussions facilitated by Jeanne Zimmerly Jantzi in Upper Sandusky, Ohio, August 2023. JEANNE ZIMMERLY JANTZI

The article reported on my resignation as superintendent of a Mennonite school, in which I cited the patriarchal assumptions of a group of people in the school community that became abusive and made my leadership unsustainable.

Before taking the role at the school in 2017, my husband and I had served internationally with Mennonite Central Committee since 1989. During those years, I’d observed the effective leadership of women in the countries where we lived. We’d worked under a woman’s leadership. After living outside of the United States for so long, I naively assumed that in my home community any questions about women’s ability and calling to lead had been settled long ago.

I assumed my generation was having a different experience than my mother’s. She lived through a time of squelched dreams for women who felt called to lead. As a child, I remember leaning forward between the seats of our VW hatchback to hear her vent to my dad on the way home from church.

The 1963 Mennonite Confession of Faith, Article 14, stated: “[I]n the order of creation God has fitted man and

woman for differing functions; man has been given a primary leadership role, while the woman is especially fitted for nurture and service. Being in Christ does not nullify these natural endowments, either in the home or in the church.”

This was the Confession used by the Mennonite Church. By 1995, the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* — used at that time by the Mennonite Church and General Conference Mennonite Church and now by

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Mennonite Church USA and Mennonite Church Canada — reversed that way of thinking, at least on paper.

Article 6 states, “The rule of man over woman is a result of sin (Genesis 3:16) and is therefore not an acceptable order among the redeemed (Galatians 3:28; 1 Corinthians 7:4; 11:11-12).”

Article 15 states, “The church calls, trains and appoints gifted men and women to a variety of leadership ministries on its behalf.”

**WOMEN ALONE CANNOT CHANGE** the historic ranking system that places men at the leadership pinnacle. Men need to be committed to dismantling patriarchy.

Revised wording in a Confession of Faith cannot bring down a deeply engrained culture that stratifies women (and other intersecting identities) below men. Many men would say that they fully believe in women’s leadership. The lack of tangible evidence of this support may be unintentional. Still other men continue to affirm the sentiments found in the 1963 Mennonite Confession of Faith. The intent or motive is irrelevant when experiences of patriarchal behavior diminish a woman’s ability to lead.

Men’s privilege in the workplace is so familiar and unquestioned that it may not even be recognized. Take something as simple as asking questions. When a male leader asks a question, it can be seen as a helpful coaching tool, or a way to get people to explore a new idea. When a female leader uses a question to engage thinking, men often assume she is asking because she doesn’t know the answer. Her teaching device is assumed to be an invitation to launch into a lengthy explanation.

From a position of unquestioned privilege, men have confidently written many books explaining how to lead. Few books by men recognize the variable in the leadership context if the leader is a woman.

There are men who want to learn about their blind spots and to change. My husband is one. We job-shared as co-leaders for 24 years in cultures that traditionally assumed the man would lead. We continuously analyzed our roles, giving and receiving feedback and striving to learn and grow.

I’ve also had opportunities to work with and observe men in the school context and in my other circles who work hard to support women’s leadership. They don’t always get it, but they want to keep learning to do it better.

I share the following suggestions for men who want to do better. The list began with a blog post I wrote and expanded with suggestions from other women’s experiences.

- 1. Sit down.** Consider whether this is the time to make space for a woman to step up in leadership instead of you. Are you ready to be in the No. 2 role? What changes would you need to make to support a woman leader?
  - 2. Notice** who is taking up the talking time in a meeting. Create space for a woman leader by turning to her and asking, “What do you think?”
  - 3. Stop interrupting.** You might not even notice when you do it. Be aware. Ask for feedback. Apologize. If a man and a woman speak up at the same time, encourage the woman to go first. Don’t accept her deferring to you.
  - 4. Steer the conversation** back to a woman if she is interrupted and the topic shifts off track. Intervene on her behalf. State to the group the facts what just happened: “Sarai was speaking, and Michael interrupted. Let’s go back to Sarai.”
  - 5. Reinforce** what a woman leader says if the man in charge ignores her point. Make sure the woman gets the credit for her contribution.
  - 6. Refer to and defer to** a woman leader. Outsiders may assume the man is in charge. Correct their mistake immediately. Introduce the woman as your leader. Use titles in the same way it’s done for men. Sometimes you may need to leave the room to reinforce the woman’s leadership.
  - 7. Quote** what women leaders have said or written and publicly give them credit for it. Elevate and promote women’s voices, including famous people and your colleagues. What they have to say is worthy of attention.
  - 8. Pay attention** to the optics. In public, note whose name is listed first. It matters who comes to the podium and who communicates publicly. Notice who sits in what chair. Step back, even if moving forward comes naturally to you.
  - 9. Encourage** confidence and affirm women in their leadership. Privately, let a woman colleague know if you notice her apologizing for her input or being tentative when she clearly knows what she is talking about.
  - 10. Base** your promotion and hiring practices on substance rather than on style. Women’s leadership does not need to follow a male mold to be effective and powerful.
  - 11. Stop protecting** women leaders. It undermines a woman’s leadership when you withhold information that you assume will be too emotionally
- 12. Learn** history. Recognize how men have shaped culture in ways that benefit men by disempowering women. Honor the ways women are rejecting this historic injustice.
  - 13. Unlearn** your tendency to take charge or to feel entitled to lead. Recognize that you’ve been shaped by a patriarchal system and that it’s possible to disrupt that system.
  - 14. Engage** in your own inner work to recognize that your value does not depend on being higher than a woman in our cultural caste system. A man with healthy self-confidence and self-respect will accept that a woman in leadership is not an attack on your value or masculinity.
  - 15. Believe** women when they tell you about their experiences of sexism. When they point out disempowering behavior or patriarchal assumptions by you or others, be curious rather than defensive. Don’t try to explain the “harmless” intent. Find out how it could be done better.
  - 16. Join** in women’s justified anger when their leadership is not respected. Let a woman see your anger at the injustice. Use the energy of righteous anger to learn, and carry that learning forward to help other men learn.

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distressing. It disempowers a leader when you assume her plate is too full and you step in to handle what she should address.

- Good intentions aren’t enough. Men can learn to do better and call upon other men to change their hearts and actions. That’s the workload they carry. Women have their own work to do to thrive as leaders. ●



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