

Three Decades Later: Credentialed Clergywomen in the Covenant (1997–2007)

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For more than thirty years, the Evangelical Covenant Church (ECC) has ordained both men and women to serve as pastors, ministers, and leaders in the church. The vote to ordain women took place at the 1976 Annual Meeting and established that women could serve in all positions of ministry in the local church and other settings. Immediately after the 1976 vote, a motion came to the floor to institute “a denominational-wide program of information, education, and placement in the matter of employment of qualified ordained women in local parishes.”¹ This motion was denied. Instead, a motion was passed that instructed the Board of the Ministry to study the issue of ordination and present a progress report to the 1977 Annual Meeting. A report was never presented.²

The First Decade

Ten years later, Mary C. Miller, then Covenant pastor at Bethel Evangelical Covenant Church of Flossmoor, Illinois, and columnist for *The Covenant Companion*, conducted a study to determine what progress the denomination had made in training and placing women in Covenant ministry.³ Miller’s study included twenty-four responses from the twenty-five women (96 percent response) who had graduated from North Park Theological Seminary (NPTS) with a Master of Divinity degree (MDiv).

1 Mary Miller, “A Decade Later: North Park Theological Seminary Female M.Div. Graduates (1977–1987),” *The Covenant Quarterly* 46, no. 4 (1988): 9, 15-16.

2 Ibid.

3 Mary Miller currently serves as the director of the Making Connections Initiative at North Park Theological Seminary.

Her findings were generally bleak with a few silver linings. The vast majority (87.5 percent) of respondents perceived the denomination's relationship to women in ministry to be negative, using words like "pessimistic" or "cautiously pessimistic" to describe their sentiments.⁴ A third of the twenty-four respondents had left the Covenant, citing "the inability to find placement in a church, and more support for women in ministry elsewhere" as reasons for their departure.⁵

Several statements from these women suggested that there was a willingness to talk about these issues, yet, "when it comes to taking action to support women in ministry, the denomination is just not there to follow through."⁶ Another respondent used even stronger language: "The Covenant does not want to risk offending its membership by standing with women in ministry in anything but a token few. The Covenant really doesn't want to be bothered."⁷ There were a few optimistic respondents who felt their gender gave them more visibility in the denomination. Others noted the liabilities of this visibility. They reported experiencing an increased pressure in ministry because of their gender being "on trial" more than their male counterparts.⁸ There was also a sense that the second call was harder than the first. As one of the respondents noted, "All I see is a glass ceiling."⁹ Miller summarized her assessment of this first decade in an article published in this journal: "Together the three motions—the quick vote, the lack of investing denominational resources, the avoidance of full discussion—seem an accurate paradigm of the denomination's treatment of ordained women since those historic votes."¹⁰

Twenty Years Later

Twenty years after the 1976 vote, a second study was conducted by Isolde Anderson, then pastor of Sauganash Community Church in Chicago.¹¹ This review of the second decade explored how the denomination was doing in encouraging, preparing, and placing women in Covenant ministry. The survey included thirty-six respondents of the sixty who were MDiv graduates from NPTS (60 percent response). Overall dissatisfac-

4 Miller, "A Decade Later," 7.

5 Ibid., 11, 8.

6 Ibid., 9.

7 Ibid., 9–10.

8 Ibid., 12.

9 Ibid., 15.

10 Ibid., 19.

11 Isolde Anderson currently serves as professor of communication at Hope College.

tion had dropped, with 47 percent expressing a negative view of the denomination's relation to women in ministry.¹²

In this second survey, four women reported that they had left the Covenant. Two of the four left because of "inability to find placement in the Covenant Church."¹³ At the time of the survey, 56 percent (twenty of the thirty-six respondents) were still serving in the Covenant. Nine were serving full-time in a Covenant church (25 percent); four were serving part-time in a Covenant church (11 percent); seven were serving as chaplains, teachers, or missionaries (19 percent). About a third of the respondents were still part of the denomination, but these women were no longer serving in local church positions.

An important finding of the twenty-year study was the significance of the "placement process," and it was discussed at length as one of the main hurdles for women in ministry. The second study, like the first, voiced "concern for a lack of teaching in Covenant congregations about the biblical basis for women in ministry as well as the lack of strong support by denominational leaders."¹⁴ Although lack of support was referenced, the respondents were more optimistic about the prospect of receiving second or third calls than those reporting in the first decade.¹⁵

Three Decades Later

Thirty years after the historic vote to ordain women, questions are still being asked. Are women being effectively placed and utilized in ministry and leadership in the Evangelical Covenant Church? Does a "stained glass ceiling" still limit women who are ordained in the Covenant? Attempting to answer these questions, a third study was undertaken by the authors, Olson and Cannon. Following a format similar to the first two, the third study distributed a questionnaire to all female MDiv graduates of NPTS, allowing for a comparison with the previous two surveys. In addition, the thirty-year study distributed an additional questionnaire to all Covenant clergywomen who hold a professional ministerial license or ordination.¹⁶

12 Anderson observed a "clear correlation between employment rates and satisfaction with the denomination." Isolde Anderson, "Two Decades Later: North Park Theological Seminary Female M.Div. Graduates (1977-1997)," *The Covenant Quarterly* 56, no. 3 (1998): 28.

13 *Ibid.*, 21.

14 *Ibid.*, 30.

15 *Ibid.*, 26.

16 It is important to note that a consistent problem over all three studies was the difficulty of finding current contact information for women who have graduated from North Park Theological Seminary and women who are currently licensed and serving in the denomination. Women with a lay license were not included.

The second survey was added because of the increased specialization in ministry, changes in the credentialing practice of the ECC, and the rapid growth of the number of ministers educated elsewhere.

Thirty-Year Study Results

In the 2007 study 363 women were contacted; 199 of those contacted graduated from the NPTS MDiv program (55 percent). Responses were returned by fifty-one MDiv graduates of NPTS (25 percent response) plus eighteen NPTS graduates holding other degrees and sixty-five Covenant clergywomen who did not graduate from NPTS but currently hold a professional ministerial license or ordination with the denomination (50 percent response). Of the total 134 who responded, only sixteen women (12 percent) reported a negative perception of the Covenant denomination's relationship to women in ministry. Respondents perceived themselves to be slightly less supported from their conferences than they did from the denomination or their local church. Of the total respondents, twenty-one (16 percent) indicated that they were solo pastors, three (2 percent) were senior pastors, and two (1 percent) were executive pastors.

A Direct Comparison: NPTS MDiv Graduates Survey Results.

Results of the survey conducted with MDiv graduates of North Park Theological Seminary indicated that, of the fifty-one respondents, twenty-seven women (53 percent) were employed in a paid ministry position, one (2 percent) was on staff in an unpaid role, and twenty-three (45 percent) were not serving in a church as of January 1, 2008. Twenty-one of those fifty-one respondents were serving in a Covenant church (41 percent). Of the twenty-eight women in staff positions (paid and unpaid) in the church, nineteen were employed full-time. Of those twenty-eight women, the breakdown of their ministry positions for both full- and part-time staff was as follows: solo pastors (eight), senior pastor (two), executive pastor (one), associate pastor (four), youth pastor (one), "other" (twelve). Of those who indicated "other," six respondents reported they were co-pastors. The perception of the Covenant denomination's relationship to women improved over the past several decades with only 16 percent of NPTS MDiv respondents reporting a negative view of the Covenant's relationship to women in ministry (compared to 87.5 percent in the ten-year study and 47 percent in the twenty-year study). Of the fifty-one respondents, six (12 percent) left the denomination for reasons that included theological differences, inability to find placement in the Covenant Church, and more support for women in ministry elsewhere. In general, responses varied widely from "I left the Covenant

because women are not supported,” to “I love the Covenant and am very affirmed.” Some seemed to indicate a desire to shift the focus away from gender: “I would just like to be a woman in ministry...why do we have to make it an issue?” “Some women don’t get calls not because they are women, but for other reasons.”

Expanding the Scope beyond NPTS MDiv Graduates. In the expanded survey of the eighty-three non-NPTS MDiv respondents, forty-nine women (59 percent) were employed in a paid ministry position, five (6 percent) were on staff in an unpaid role, and twenty-nine (35 percent) were not serving in a church as of January 1, 2008.¹⁷ Of the fifty women in paid and unpaid staff positions, thirty-two worked forty hours per week or more. The breakdown of their ministry positions, including both full- and part-time staff, was as follows: solo pastor (thirteen), senior pastor (one), executive pastor (one), associate pastor (eleven), youth pastor (four), other (twenty-four). Only 10 percent of respondents in this group indicated a negative view of the Covenant’s relationship to women in ministry.

Reflection on the Results

One of the positive trajectories identified in the results of the 2007 surveys is the continued decline in negative perceptions about being women in ministry in the Covenant. In the 1988 survey, the vast majority of respondents indicated negative perceptions (87.5 percent). In the second study (1998), the percentage of negative perceptions decreased to 47 percent of the survey respondents. In 2007 only 16 percent of NPTS MDiv graduates and 12 percent of total respondents held negative views.¹⁸

In the 2007 surveys, there was no clear indication of how difficult the second or third call processes were for women. Of the NPTS MDiv graduates who responded, eight (16 percent) indicated the second or third calling was easier, and for six (12 percent) it was more difficult. The majority, thirty-seven (72 percent), responded “other.” Of those who had an easier time in later calls, one respondent attributed it to leaving the denomination; another was already serving outside the denomination and took a second call outside the Covenant. Several others suggested that the

17 Three of the total respondents volunteered that the reason they are no longer serving is because of childrearing.

18 It is important to note that with such small numbers of surveys returned, one negative or positive response can significantly affect results. A total of twenty-four out of twenty-five women responded to the 1988 survey, thirty-six out of sixty responded in 1998, and in 2007 the number of total respondents were 134 out of 363.

call process was easier because they were more familiar with the process, had more experience in ministry, and had more Covenant contacts.

Of the six who experienced their second and third callings as more difficult, the following reasons were offered: “very few positions that would have been a good fit for my gifting and experience were open to women,” “there were opportunities for service in pastoral roles such as youth ministry, but not for associate pastor or senior pastor positions,” and “many of the opportunities that presented themselves to serve were not in traditional pastoral positions.”

Of the thirty-seven who chose “other,” fifteen were still in their first call. Others are now serving in chaplaincy, active military duty, missions, and other ministry positions. One respondent stated that, while she did not have trouble during her first or second call, some of those involved in the call process “just didn’t get it and many churches wouldn’t even consider a woman at all—so the pool of possible churches was still rather small.”

As in the NPTS MDiv survey, a large number of respondents (thirty-one) of the expanded survey are still in their first call, bringing the number to forty-six total (34 percent). In conjunction with this statistic, it is not surprising that the reports also showed an increasing number of women being educated for ministry at the master’s and doctoral levels. Enrollment at NPTS for the 2007–2008 school year reflected this trend. Forty-nine percent of enrolled students were female, and of that group 24 percent were working toward an MDiv (compared with 40 percent of men). In the next several years, the acceptance of women in ministry will be tested as more and more women enter professional ministry in the Covenant.

Current Statistics

It is important to look at the thirty-year survey results in light of ministerial statistics available from the Department of the Ordered Ministry (DOM). The 2008 DOM records show a total of 348 credentialed women of 2,132 credentialed clergy in the denomination (16 percent; credentialing now includes ordination to word and sacrament and ordination to specialized ministry).¹⁹ The total number of women in solo, senior, or co-pastor

¹⁹ The 2007 survey went out to 363 women based on records given to the authors from the DOM and NPTS in 2006. The difference of numbers is a result of (1) the dates of when the statistics were evaluated, (2) the survey did not include women with lay licenses, (3) difficulty cross-referencing databases and no centralized database for the denomination.

positions is forty-five (6.8 percent) of 656 total.²⁰ Of the 775 churches in the denomination, less than 1 percent (0.7 percent) has female senior/executive pastors in multi-staff churches. David Kersten, executive minister of the ordered ministry, says: “The senior/solo preaching pastor is the threshold position. The advances in this area have happened in the last seven to eight years. Our department, in conjunction with the Commission on Biblical Gender Equality, plans to continue to advocate for women in ministry through direct conversation with the conference superintendents, education, and orientation for search committees of local churches.”²¹

Formed in 2002, the Commission on Biblical Gender Equality (BGE) is working toward continued advocacy in the denomination through “communication of the biblical mandate on all levels of the church.” According to Carol Lawson, director of staff ministry for DOM, the BGE has created two task forces—one focused on advocacy at the denominational level and one focused on the local church, working for grassroots level change.²² The Association for Covenant Clergy Women was formed in 1998 by men and women of the Covenant ministerium to “support collaborative efforts within the ECC to provide women clergy with opportunities to serve in their call,” through advocacy, fellowship, provision of resources, and education.²³

Looking Back, Looking Ahead

Although the Covenant Church has made significant strides in support of women in ministry, there is still a need for further growth and development. Women need to be given the opportunity to break through the “stained glass ceiling” of top leadership positions in the church, to achieve an increased percentage of women in lead, solo, and preaching positions (only five of the total survey respondents [4 percent] are senior/executive pastors of multi-staff churches). Efforts have been made to continue promoting education in the denomination, and these efforts should continue to be extended to the congregational level. Too many Covenant churches do not adhere to a theology that affirms women in leadership, and too many that affirm that theology do not currently have any women serving in positions of ministry or leadership.

One of the most obvious results of the 2007 surveys was the need

20 Note: seven of the forty-five women in solo, senior, or co-pastor positions are serving outside of the denomination, but are credentialed Covenant pastors.

21 Carol Lawson and David Kersten, interview by authors, August 6, 2008.

22 Ibid. The BGE website is <http://www.covchurch.org/ministry/bge>.

23 The ACCW website is <http://covchurch.org/accw>.

for the denomination to have more accessible databases and tracking mechanisms. The number of women graduating with degrees from NPTS is close to the equivalent of men, but the percentage of women serving in executive positions, senior pastor roles, or leadership in multi-staffed churches is disproportionate. While more data is becoming available, especially on the denominational level, there is still a need to consider the role of women in the church at the conference level as well. Common perception is that some conferences are more supportive and intentional about finding roles for female pastors to serve in their churches than others.

Another next step in working toward equal opportunities for women and men in the denomination is a study on salary equity. In the marketplace, 2008 statistics show that women continue to make less money per dollar than their male counterparts in equivalent positions. The church must not only take seriously this matter, it should lead the way for the secular world, honoring the God-given gifts of both men and women.

Looking back over the past thirty years, we can affirm that the Evangelical Covenant Church has made progress in paving the way for women to serve in positions of leadership within the denomination. But there is still much work to be done. The year 2016 will mark forty years since the historic decision to ordain women in the Covenant. With continued advancement and effort, “what will the picture be in another decade?”²⁴

Questions for 2008 Women in Ministry Survey

1. What year did you graduate from North Park Theological Seminary?

(Those who graduated from another seminary were sent a separate questionnaire that asked respondents to name that seminary. All other questions were the same.)

2. With what degree did you graduate?

- Master of Divinity
- Master of Arts in Christian Formation/Education
- Master of Arts in Theological Studies
- Master of Arts in Christian Ministry
- Doctor of Ministry in Preaching

²⁴ Miller, “A Decade Later,” 19.

- Dual degree, if so what two degrees _____
3. What was your church membership upon entrance to North Park?
- Evangelical Covenant
 - Presbyterian
 - Methodist
 - Lutheran
 - Evangelical
 - Nondenominational
 - Assemblies of God
 - Roman Catholic
 - Baptist
 - Other _____
4. What is your present church membership?
- Evangelical Covenant
 - Presbyterian
 - Methodist
 - Lutheran
 - Evangelical
 - Nondenominational
 - Assemblies of God
 - Roman Catholic
 - Baptist
 - Other _____
5. Are you ordained?
- Yes, to word and sacrament
 - Yes, to specialized ministry
 - Yes, in a denomination other than the
Evangelical Covenant Church
 - Pursuing ordination (type and date expected): _____
 - No
6. As of January 1, 2008, are you presently serving a church?
- Yes (paid position)
 - Yes (unpaid position)
 - No

7. If you are currently in ministry, are you serving a Covenant church?

- Yes
- No, I am serving in a
 - Presbyterian
 - United Methodist
 - Lutheran
 - Evangelical
 - Nondenominational
 - Assemblies of God
 - Roman Catholic
 - Baptist
 - Other_____

8. If you are serving in a church, how many hours per week are you working?

- Less than 20
- 20-40
- 40 or more

9. What primary role do you fill in your congregation?

- Solo pastor
- Senior pastor of multi-staff church, if so how large is your staff?
 - 1-3 4-6 7-9 10 or more
- Executive pastor of multi-staff church, if so how large is your staff?
 - 1-3 4-6 7-9 10 or more
- Associate pastor, if so what is your primary area of ministry?
 - Christian formation
 - Pastoral care
 - Missions and evangelism
 - Administrative
 - Preaching
 - Other: _____
- Youth pastor

10. Is your current church a church in which you were a layperson before earning your theological degree?

- Yes No

11. If you are not serving a church in a pastoral role, please indicate what work you are doing at the present time. _____

12. Are you married?

- No
- Yes, spouse is not in ministry.
- Yes, spouse serves in ministry.

Please specify what role: _____

13. When you graduated from North Park Theological Seminary, did you place your name in process for a pastoral call in the denomination?

- Yes
- No, indicate the reasons:
 - Decision to enter specialized ministry
 - Change in job interests
 - Anticipated difficulty in the Covenant's placement process
 - Theological differences with denomination
 - Other: _____

14. Please list the contacts you had from Covenant churches in the first year after graduation during the placement process:

- Phone calls from conference superintendent
- Phone calls from church members
- Phone calls from search committees
- Meeting with church search committees
- Meeting with congregations
- Senior pastor of church needing multiple staff
- Phone call from pastor near the open church who informed you of opening

15. What work have you done since graduating from North Park?

- Pastoral ministry, full-time
- Pastoral ministry, part-time
- Specialized ministry, full-time
- Specialized ministry, part-time
- Paid conference or denominational leadership ministry position
- Unpaid ministry
- Other, please specify _____

16. If you have served in more than one church since graduation, how

would you compare the second or third placement process with the first?

- Easier Other
 Harder Please explain your answer _____

17. If you were a member of the Covenant upon entering North Park but are not a member now, please indicate some of the reasons for your change:

- Theological differences
 Inability to find placement in a Covenant church
 Change in career goals
 More support for women in ministry elsewhere
 Comments _____

18. If appropriate, describe how placement as a female pastor has been either easy or difficult for you.

19. Mark an X where you perceive the Covenant denomination's relationship to women in ministry to be.

Positive _____ Negative

20. Mark an X to indicate how supported you feel as a woman in ministry.

Very supported _____ No support

21. How would you like to see the progress of women in ministry aided in the Covenant?

22. Comments of encouragement and/or discouragement _____

23. Name (optional). _____

Date. _____