

Four Decades Later: Credentialed Clergywomen in the Evangelical Covenant Church

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I feel that there is a general desire to support and advocate for women clergy from our denominational leaders. Yet, when it gets to the nitty-gritty of placing women it doesn't pan out. As I noted earlier, women are often passed over because we lack "experience."

*Yet, we are offered few opportunities to gain the experience, and our other skills and life experience are discounted
(2016 survey respondent).*

Since 1976, those who comprise the Evangelical Covenant Church (ECC)—clergy, laypeople, seminary faculty and staff, and denominational leaders—have existed in a shared community that openly affirms the ordination of women. Yet the stories of clergywomen holding credentials in the ECC reflect a diverse range of perspectives on the denominational climate for women, past and present. As with any institution that undergoes change, the process of shifting the structure and the culture of the ECC in support of clergywomen is an arduous process. In the first decade of women's ordination (1977–1987), women represented a mere 6.9 percent of total ECC ordinands, and only 15.2 percent of the total in the second decade (1988–1997). This figure has grown, with

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women representing an average of 27.8 percent of all ordinands in the last ten years.¹ Yet even as the ECC recognizes progress, important and necessary questions remain. How are clergywomen faring in the job search (call) process? What types of jobs are women securing? Are women finding support as they serve local churches, both within congregations and regional conferences? Do women pursue senior leadership positions, such as solo or lead pastor roles, and are they affirmed in those pursuits? What is the culture of the denomination as it relates to clergywomen? Do the symbols, language, beliefs, values, and norms of the ECC reflect an unwavering view that women and men are equally called and gifted?

Research has shown that for clergywomen across denominations, support and advocacy on paper does not guarantee support and advocacy in practice.² Indeed, ideas and actions do not always neatly align, and the diverse experiences of women called to ministry in the ECC reflect this reality. Marking each decade since ECC Annual Meeting delegates went “on record as favoring the ordination of women” in 1976,³ Covenant women have undertaken a study examining the status of clergywomen within the ECC. The present study, four decades later, continues this tradition, asking again where the denomination has made progress and where greater work is needed to form a denominational structure and culture that affirm and advocate for clergywomen in all levels of ministry.

Building off the previous decadal studies, this article explores major themes that emerged from a survey sent to credentialed Covenant clergywomen during the summer of 2016. Through a series of questions, I highlight broad trends around the types of positions clergywomen hold and the ministries they serve; experiences in the job search process; perceptions of support from local churches, conferences, and the denomination; reasons for leaving ministry; and suggestions from clergywomen on how the ECC can promote positive change. I incorporate women’s personal reflections, perspectives, and ideas to reinforce the broader statistical trends. Drawing from these key themes, the subsequent analysis includes recommendations on how to expand opportunities and affirmation for women at all levels of leadership in the ECC. While the ECC has made important strides in relation to its stated position on women’s ordination,

1 Data provided by the Develop Leaders mission priority (formerly the Department of the Ordered Ministry) of the Evangelical Covenant Church.

2 Mark Chaves, *Ordaining Women* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 89.

3 *Covenant Yearbook 1976*, 178.

I argue that a combined focus balancing structural and cultural change is necessary for the denomination to truly break through the barriers clergywomen continue to encounter in their service to the church.

Research Foundations

This present study follows in the tradition of previous efforts to document clergywomen's experiences within the ECC, from their time in seminary, through the call process, and into ministry roles. In 1987, marking a decade of ordaining women, Mary Miller conducted a survey of the "pioneer generation"⁴—the first group of women earning master of divinity (M.Div.) degrees from North Park Theological Seminary.⁵ Among the 25 women falling into this category, 24 completed the survey (96 percent). Miller's results indicated that 7 of the 24 respondents were serving as pastors in ECC churches while an equal number had left the denomination. The majority felt the ECC had a negative relationship with women in ministry.

Isolde Anderson replicated Miller's survey in 1997, this time gathering data from 38 women (out of 60) who earned M.Div. degrees from North Park Theological Seminary (63 percent).⁶ After two decades, clergywomen continued to struggle finding positions as well as support and advocacy within the denomination, particularly among regional conference superintendents. Anderson's study suggested that the ECC supported clergywomen as an idea but not in actual practice. Yet she discovered growing optimism, too, with fewer women leaving the ECC and more moving on to second and third ministry positions.⁷ Janet Stocks's research on evangelical feminists illustrates that women are willing to stay in a context that is less than supportive if they trust in the overall integrity of the institution and believe that change is possible.⁸ Anderson's findings

4 The term "pioneer generation" applied to clergywomen stems from Joy Charlton's longitudinal research on Methodist and Lutheran clergy who were among the first to serve in their denominations, Charlton, "Clergywomen of the Pioneer Generation: A Longitudinal Study," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 36, no. 4 (1997): 599–613.

5 Mary Miller, "A Decade Later: North Park Theological Seminary Female M.Div. Graduates (1977–1987)," *Covenant Quarterly* 46, no. 4 (1988): 6–26.

6 Isolde Anderson, "Two Decades Later: North Park Theological Seminary Female M.Div. Graduates (1977–1997)," *Covenant Quarterly* 56, no. 3 (1998): 19–36.

7 Miller, "A Decade Later," 9.

8 Janet Stocks, "To Stay or Leave? Organizational Legitimacy in the Struggle for Change among Evangelical Feminists," in *Contemporary American Religion: An Ethnographic Reader*, ed. Penny Edgell Becker and Nancy L. Eiesland (Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press, 1997), 99–120.

reflected this trend, suggesting clergywomen found greater hope for positive change as time progressed and therefore remained within the ECC in greater numbers compared to the first decade.

A study marking thirty years, conducted in 2007 by Amanda Olson and Mae Cannon, expanded the sample significantly in an effort to recognize changing patterns in ministry.⁹ While they continued the practice of surveying NPTS graduates for comparative purposes, they broadened contacts to include women who were credentialed in the ECC but received seminary training elsewhere. Thus, both the total contacts and resulting sample size were larger. Out of 363 women contacted (55 percent North Park MDiv graduates), 134 responded to the survey (37 percent). Of this sample, 51 were NPTS MDiv graduates, 18 were NPTS graduates with other degrees, and 65 were credentialed clergywomen who studied at other seminaries.

Olson and Cannon discovered a generally improved view of the ECC's relationship to women in ministry, with just 16 women (12 percent) reporting a negative perception.¹⁰ Echoing the previous two studies, they also identified continued challenges at the regional conference level. They noted that, while women's opportunities and experiences had improved in some ways, women remained highly underrepresented in senior and solo roles, as well as positions focused on preaching. Among those who completed the survey, 21 women (16 percent) were serving as solo pastors, 3 women (2 percent) held positions as senior pastors, and 2 women (1 percent) were executive pastors. The authors acknowledged valuable efforts to promote education around women's ordination (such as the development of the Commission on Biblical Gender Equality and resources such as *Called and Gifted*, a guide outlining the denomination's theological position on women in ministry¹¹) but also argued that a "stained glass ceiling" remained.¹²

In their paper, Olson and Cannon quoted former executive minister of the ordered ministry and current dean of North Park Theological

9 Amanda Olson and Mae Cannon, "Three Decades Later: Credentialed Clergywomen in the Covenant (1997–2007)," *Covenant Quarterly* 67, no. 2 (2009): 45–51.

10 *Ibid.*, 47.

11 The website of the Evangelical Covenant Church includes a range of resources related to the original pamphlet authored by Sharon Cairns Mann (Chicago: Covenant Publications, 2005). The pamphlet is accessible at www.covchurch.org/resources/called-and-gifted-material.

12 Olson and Cannon, "Three Decades Later," 51. The concept of the "stained glass ceiling" is explored in greater depth by Sally B. Purvis, *The Stained-Glass Ceiling: Churches and Their Women Pastors* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995).

Seminary David Kersten, who described the senior/solo preaching pastor as “the threshold position.”¹³ Arguing in favor of women pursuing senior, solo, and preaching-focused positions as a means of progress is not meant to devalue other ministry concentrations such as Christian formation, pastoral care, family ministry, and chaplaincy. With this in mind, it is important to critically examine gendered patterns, asking if women remain concentrated in certain types of ministry because they are women. Both women and men should have opportunities to pursue and be affirmed in the type of ministry to which they are gifted and called. Supporting women called to pursue solo and senior positions is less about a hierarchy in ministry roles and more an effort to challenge existing obstacles women encounter as they seek full inclusion and affirmation at all levels of leadership.

The ECC is not unique in its struggle to align stated positions with practice throughout its congregations and conferences. This trend—what Mark Chaves calls “loose coupling”¹⁴—informs a context in which discrimination against women occurs in ways that are more covert and de facto, and less openly identifiable. Looking at patterns across numerous traditions, Chaves argues that women’s ordination serves as a symbolic representation of a denomination’s stance on broader socio-political issues, specifically feminism but more broadly modernity, diminishing focus on practical and constructive ways to support women.¹⁵ Yet research also shows that the presence of women in ministry positions alters not only laypeople’s perceptions but also the broader culture of a congregation concerning clergy and gender.¹⁶ When women occupy leadership roles in churches, preach, wear liturgical markers, and hold credentials, they are breaking down gendered images of the pastorate and actively creating new images.¹⁷ Thus, a paradox remains: if women’s pastoral presence alters the structure and culture of a denomination but that denominational culture and structure include significant barriers for clergywomen, how will change occur?

13 Olson and Cannon, “Three Decades Later,” 50.

14 Chaves, *Ordaining Women*, 14.

15 *Ibid.*, 83.

16 Joy Charlton, “Clergywomen of the Pioneer Generation.”

17 Joy Charlton, “Women and Clergywomen,” *Sociology of Religion* 61, no. 4 (1997): 421; Ruth Wallace, *They Call Her Pastor: A New Role for Catholic Women* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992).

Methodology

This present study, marking four decades of women's ordination in the ECC, explores similar questions as these previous efforts, while further expanding both the sample and the scope of the survey. Develop Leaders¹⁸ offered contact information for all women holding credentials in the denomination. As a central and thorough source of potential participants, these records alleviated two potential limitations of this study. First, as many Covenant clergywomen attend seminaries other than NPTS, drawing contacts from denominational records meant these women were included in the list of potential contacts. Olson and Cannon's 2007 study followed a similar approach.¹⁹ I did not, however, include all women MDiv graduates of North Park as had the previous studies. Just as ECC clergywomen attend a range of seminaries, not all women pursuing the MDiv at NPTS intend to serve ECC churches or ministries. Including these graduates in the study could have skewed the results. Thus, I relied completely on the denominational records of credentialed clergywomen to develop the final list of contacts.

A significant challenge in the sampling process involved determining who to include of those holding ECC credentials. While women do ministry in many diverse roles—formal and informal—the scope of this study is women's *ordination*, and therefore the contacts reflected this particular focus, surveying women who are ordained or who are licensed and on a likely path toward ordination. The 410 clergywomen who received the survey represent those ordained to word and sacrament or ordained to word and service (formerly ordained to specialized ministry), including those retired or categorized as inactive. Women holding a ministry license or a license for theological student were also contacted. Unlike previous decadal studies, women holding the bivocational license were also sent the survey, as denominational records indicate many of these women hold pastoral positions and may be on a path toward ordination.

The survey itself was significantly reworked and expanded. The updated version sought greater detail on women's navigation of the search process, experiences serving in a church or ministry, and perceptions of support across multiple positions. Questions also addressed salary, benefits, and pension or retirement support (on a very general level) and provided respondents numerous opportunities to share personal experi-

18 Develop Leaders is one of the mission priorities of the Evangelical Covenant Church, formerly the Department of the Ordered Ministry.

19 Olson and Cannon, "Three Decades Later."

ences through open-ended questions. The resulting data is expansive and rich in complexity. The survey, administered through the online instrument Survey Monkey, was sent out in late June 2016, coinciding with the Covenant Annual Meeting in Phoenix where an announcement was also made at the Ministerium meeting, encouraging participation. Clergywomen received a reminder email in mid-July. The survey was again advertised at the Women Ministries Triennial Conference, and a final reminder email was sent in early August notifying clergywomen of the closing date.

Out of 410 clergywomen who were sent the survey, the final sample includes 224 women, a response rate of 55 percent.²⁰ Among the respondents, 103 attended North Park Theological Seminary (46 percent), and 115 attended other seminaries (51 percent), confirming the expected trend that ECC clergy frequently study in non-ECC seminaries. Among those ordained to word and sacrament, 126 are currently active, 10 are inactive, and 8 are retired. Women ordained to word and service include 30 active clergy, 1 inactive, and 3 retired. Sixteen women identify as licensed (with one noting her license is soon expiring) and 30 are licensed and currently pursuing ordination.

While I discuss clergywomen's experiences in general, there is of course no universal women's experience. Gender, race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic class are among the most significant intersecting dimensions of social location and inequality in our society, thus efforts to advocate for clergywomen must recognize varying experiences of women of color, low-income women, and others who may face particular levels of exclusion within the ECC. Approximately 10 percent of respondents identify as women of color (12 black/African American, 5 Asian, 4 Hispanic/Latino, 1 American Indian/Alaska Native, and 2 selected "other"), while 82 percent identify as white. The remainder did not identify race/ethnicity.²¹ The ECC has been intentional in its efforts to promote racial and ethnic diversity within its churches and leadership structures, yet given the limited number of respondents of color, further research on how these efforts impact clergywomen would be useful.

20 The total number of responses was 241 women; however, several responses were incomplete or ineligible based on the criteria determined for participants and so were not included in the final sample.

21 Denominational records on the race and ethnicity of its clergy are incomplete; therefore, comparative statistics for the entire ECC ministerium are not available.

Results

A general understanding of where clergywomen currently stand and the challenges women face in ministry are best addressed by exploring some key questions, outlined below. The succeeding section offers an analysis of key issues emerging from these questions and a discussion on strategies to move the ECC toward structural and cultural change in greater support of its clergywomen.

What types of positions do clergywomen currently hold? Of those currently serving in a ministry role, 77 percent serve in a Covenant congregation or ministry, and 23 percent serve in a congregation or ministry of another denomination. Women primarily serve in associate positions (25 percent) concentrating on Christian formation, pastoral care, youth, children, and family ministries. A significant group (33 percent) described their current role as “other,” with co-pastor, youth, children and/or family ministry, and roles in higher education as dominant themes.

After thirty years of the ECC’s ordaining women, Olson and Cannon argued that greater effort should be made to support women pursuing senior level positions, including lead and solo pastoral roles and positions emphasizing preaching.²² At forty years, this continues to be a barrier for clergywomen. Just 12 percent of respondents are solo pastors, 6 percent senior pastors of multi-staff church, and 2 percent executive pastors, representing similar figures from ten years ago. Because co-pastor roles vary, this was not listed as an option, though 4 percent of respondents described their role as co-pastor in the “other” category.²³ Additionally, the survey did not separate out church planting as a specific type of pastoral role (as in solo, senior, associate), but women identified specific issues in church planting, including the underrepresentation of women among ECC church planters, experiences of feeling pushed off this path, and a sense that women were not viewed as potential church planters. As one pastor stated,

[W]hile I don’t worry too much about finding calls as I’m married to a pastor and we’d likely move together if we moved,

22 Olson and Cannon, “Three Decades Later,” 51.

23 An in-depth analysis on the variation among clergywomen serving as co-pastors is beyond the scope of this survey, but I expect further exploration into this type of position would garner interesting and complex results in relation to gender. Is co-pastoring a means of challenging hierarchies within ministry roles? For instance, one survey respondent noted that her congregation has no hierarchy, and all clergy are co-pastors. Alternatively, is co-pastor a more “comfortable” way for a church to accept a woman in pastoral leadership, particularly at a senior or lead level?

if it were just me, and especially if I were single, finding a call would not remotely be a given. What is more, many of our systems, including church planting, are set up with masculine constructs, categories, and vocabulary.

Further research into the gender dynamics of co-pastoring and church planting would allow for a deeper understanding of the particularly complex aspects of these ministry roles.

What is the relationship between congregation size and position type? The largest percentage of respondents (30 percent) pastor congregations of 100 members or less. Among the 23 solo pastors who responded to the survey, all serve congregations with fewer than 100 members.²⁴ Twelve respondents currently hold positions as senior pastors of multi-staff congregations, one in a church of 200–300 members, three in churches of 100–200 members, and seven in churches with less than 100 members. In other words, women in senior leadership roles primarily pastor smaller congregations.

What, then, are women's positions in larger congregations? Of the nine women in churches of 300–400 members, one serves as a co-pastor, and all others are in a ministry position related to pastoral care or Christian formation. Twenty-six women indicated they serve in congregations with more than 400 members, with two serving as executive pastors. The remaining 24 clergywomen occupy associate or other roles related to pastoral care, Christian formation, discipleship, outreach, mission, or family ministries. This raises the question: If clergywomen serve large congregations but remain heavily concentrated in historically gendered ministry roles, is this a sign of progress or stagnancy?

As noted, considering the concentration of women in particular types of ministry is less about creating a hierarchy of ministry roles and more about the range of opportunities available to women. Certainly a clergywoman called and gifted to Christian formation or pastoral care should be affirmed in her gifts. However, are women in these positions because of calling and giftedness, or because churches and ministries will only consider women for these historically gendered roles, overlooking women

²⁴ This is possibly due to the size of church that can function with a solo pastor and what small churches can afford. In order to determine if this is related to gender, one would have to analyze data on clergymen serving as solo pastors and compare congregation size.

candidates for preaching, lead, or solo positions? A look at women's stated preferences compared to the positions they actually secure sheds further light on this question.

How do women's preferences compare to the ministry roles they secure? Among respondents who pursued positions in the ECC call process for their first ministry role, 25 percent were seeking solo or senior pastor roles, and 35 percent preferred associate positions (most frequently in Christian formation, followed by youth and pastoral care). The 33 percent who selected "other" primarily described their preferences as co-pastor, youth, or open to multiple roles.

Examining outcomes for those seeking a position through the call process, 9 percent (18 women) were called to a senior or solo role (8 of whom listed senior or solo pastor as their preference), and 31 percent of all respondents secured an associate role. Among those in the associate category, 25 percent found positions in Christian formation, 19 percent in youth ministry, 10 percent in pastoral care, and 41 percent of respondents selected "other," describing positions as worship, formation, and children and family ministries. In other words, while the percentages of women desiring and securing an associate position were fairly similar, this is not the case for those seeking a senior or solo role.

It is worth noting that clergy—women and men—may receive an unexpected call to a position they did not envision. But how do these dynamics play out in the call process? Are women directed toward gendered ministry roles? Or are they pushed to consider senior leadership opportunities, even if they do not actively indicate interest?

One woman's comment on her struggle to find a job illuminated this trend more clearly: "I have always felt very supported by ECC leadership, but not so much by churches. While I was in the search process I received two calls from churches, while my husband received nearly a dozen (when he was not even open to call!)."

While women typically experience a "glass ceiling" in male-dominated careers, Williams's study on men in female-dominated professions shows how men are frequently pushed to pursue more senior level positions—a phenomenon she calls the "glass escalator."²⁵ Although ministry is not a female-dominated profession, this example suggests that perhaps men experience a "stained-glass escalator" alongside women's stained-glass ceiling. One might expect clergywomen's preferences to shift as they move from a first call into second or third calls and beyond; however, the

25 Christine L. Williams, *Still a Man's World: Men Who Do Women's Work* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

results do not show major growth in women seeking lead, solo, or preaching focused positions (nor do the outcomes of searches show significant changes in the type of positions women actually secure).

How do women find and secure ministry positions? Among the more interesting trends emerging from this study is the fact that women are finding positions through means other than the ECC call process.²⁶ Upon completing seminary, 51 percent of respondents entered the call process with the ECC, and 49 percent did not. This same trend continues as women consider second and third positions where again only about half (50 percent for second positions and 54 percent for third positions) pursued ministry jobs through the ECC call process.

How then do clergywomen secure positions? Some women pursued non-parish ministry or had jobs in place when they entered seminary, reflecting the non-traditional route many clergy take into ministry, perhaps beginning with a lay-leader role and eventually pursuing seminary training and ordination. However, seeing this trend throughout women's careers—extending into second and third searches—means there is more to this story. In asking women to comment on the helpfulness of contacts with congregations or denominational leaders in their search processes, many indicated they found positions through people they knew, from a church they were attending or through a mentoring relationship. In other words, opportunities to build and use social capital are central to clergywomen finding jobs in the denomination at roughly the same rate as the traditional call process.

How do clergywomen perceive support from the local church, regional conference, and the denomination? When asked how supported clergywomen feel or felt by their local church in their first position, 53 percent chose very supported, and 30 percent selected somewhat supported. Among those experiencing a lack of support in their first position, 6 percent reported feeling somewhat unsupported, and 6 percent feel or felt very unsupported (the remaining respondents were neutral). Similar perceptions continued into women's second positions, with 55 percent reporting they feel or felt very supported, and 29 percent indicating they feel or felt somewhat supported. (Eight percent reported feeling somewhat unsupported and 2 percent very unsupported.) Perceived denominational support was also encouraging, with 36 percent of clergywomen indicating they have felt very supported by the ECC as a

26 This could represent a general shift in the ways both women and men secure ministry positions. Without comparable data on clergymen entering the call process, there are limits in suggesting this is a gender-specific trend.

clergywoman and 46 percent somewhat supported. Yet with 12 percent of clergywomen describing the denomination as somewhat unsupportive (7 percent) or very unsupportive (5 percent), there is no major change since the last decadal study.

The regional conference continues to be the level where support is experienced as most lacking for clergywomen. As a respondent stated,

I have found support and contact from the regional conference very limited in my time as a pastor. I have felt especially, given a first [call] as a female senior pastor, more contact would be given. I have found this not to be true. In addition, I have found that, as a pastor in general, outside of district pastors' meetings there is little contact with respect to the pastoral care of pastors.

In women's first ministry positions, 45 percent reported feeling very supported and 20 percent somewhat supported by the regional conference. Clergywomen experiencing a lack of support included 8 percent feeling somewhat unsupported and 8 percent very unsupported. A clergywoman described her view: "Very supported in my credentialing and opportunities for service outside of the local church (boards, committees) but very mixed results in terms of support from the local church and the advocacy of conference leadership." Perceptions improved as women advanced into second ministry positions (6 percent somewhat unsupported and 5 percent very unsupported), but, as Olson and Cannon observed ten years ago,²⁷ this pattern suggests ongoing need for an intentional focus on regional conference cultures.

Where do clergywomen stand financially? For the first time in the decadal studies, clergywomen were asked questions on salary, benefits, and pension or retirement support.²⁸ Out of the 155 women who provided a salary range (42 selected "not applicable," and the remaining 27 skipped the question), 50 percent (77) are currently earning \$40,000 per year or less. An additional 26 percent (41) are earning between \$40,000 and \$60,000 per year. Half of women are in churches or ministries that contribute to the ECC pension program, and an additional 11 percent receive support for a private retirement savings plan. The ECC requires congregations to contribute to its pension program for licensed and

27 Olson and Cannon, "Three Decades Later," 51.

28 The survey defined salary as "current annual salary range, including any housing allowance (paid or in-kind, such as housing in a parsonage) but not including benefits and pension."

ordained clergy, but this does not always translate into greater support, as one respondent described:

The biggest challenge and what eventually led to me leaving was that the church didn't want to bear the extra expense of a pension for me, were I to be licensed. So rather than doing distance learning I went to North Park. It turned out to be great, but it was very discouraging at the time.

That this woman lost an opportunity because of the pension responsibility is not a reason to alter the denominational policy on retirement support. Instead, it is a sign that education is needed on the value of caring for clergy beyond their specific tenure in a church or ministry.

While these data offer a general picture of where women stand, it is difficult to draw clear conclusions around gender bias in pay and benefits without also examining overall trends in the ECC. Yet if the ECC aligns with general societal trends, it is probable that a pay gap exists among clergy and is especially striking for women of color.²⁹ Examining the specifics of clergy salary equity is beyond the scope of this study, but the results of this project still offer valuable insight into the financial standing of clergywomen and suggest need for a more thorough, in-depth study on clergy pay equity.

Any study on pay equity needs to consider patterns around the ministry positions in which women and men serve. If women remain primarily concentrated in associate positions (especially historically gendered roles like Christian formation or family ministry), they are also concentrated in lower paying positions. In other words, any pay gap that does exist may be a product of the types of positions women secure. Therefore, efforts to support women pursuing senior roles are a means of promoting greater economic equity among clergy. Further, clergywomen's concentration in lower paying positions or part-time work impacts pension. Addressing pay equity—by ensuring women are paid the same as men for equal work, but also ensuring women are not overly concentrated in lower paying roles—has both immediate and long-term impact on pastors' economic stability.

29 Ariane Hegewisch and Asha DuMonthier, "The Gender Wage Gap: 2015; Annual Earnings Differences by Gender, Race, and Ethnicity," Institute for Women's Policy Research, September 2016, <http://www.iwpr.org/publications/pubs/the-gender-wage-gap-2015-annual-earnings-differences-by-gender-race-and-ethnicity>.

Why aren't women serving in ministry? Clergywomen cited a range of reasons they are no longer serving in ministry, highlighting four key trends: retirement, difficulty finding jobs (including numerous instances in which women were among final candidates but not called), negative experiences, and family needs. In many instances, multiple factors interacted in pushing a woman out of ministry. For example, one woman stated, "I needed to retire for lack of call to ordained ministry. Spiritual direction has not been deemed a call." Another noted, "I honestly got burned out on church politics, and found that I was not often doing the things I am most passionate about—instead I was often administrating and implementing someone else's vision."

In these stories, women leave ministry not for one isolated reason but for several working together—a negative experience coupled with a mismatch between gift and position, or challenges finding a job aligning with age. These examples illustrate how clergywomen face multiple barriers that, in combination, are enough to end one's ministry career.

Family issues represent a significant theme in these explanations and an area deserving of more intentional exploration. And like other issues, family demands often interact with other factors, leading a clergywoman to step out of ministry: "Options for part time work in ministry along with responsibilities at home are tricky. This has been the issue for me since I had kids . . . balancing my career, husband's career and kids' needs have put my career/work/ministry on the back burner." Another shared,

My husband is also a pastor and we decided, because of our adopted children, that it was better for just one of us to be serving in vocational ministry, at least for a season. And, when we looked for co-pastoral positions, the choices were few. He, alone, got more interviews and opportunities to explore than I did.

Clergywomen are making choices to leave ministry, but all choices occur within a social context and out of available options. Although speculative, it is worth considering if some women may have thrived in integrating family and ministry had they been given a wider range of opportunities and support.

What is encouraging and discouraging as a clergywoman in the ECC? The survey results reflected both positive and negative experiences, with women frequently balancing affirmation alongside discouragement throughout their careers. When asked what is most encouraging as a clergywoman in the ECC, women highlighted colleagues and networks,

other women, and men who advocate for clergywomen as their most valued sources of support. There are clear generational trends as well. As the “pioneer generations” have found inspiration in younger generations of clergywomen pursuing their call to ministry, these newer generations simultaneously noted how much they valued the path trod by those who came first. Women also spoke about the encouragement they have felt in having their call affirmed by the denomination, even if this affirmation does not always translate into constructive, effective solutions for jobs and advancement.

Amid these signs of progress, women still pointed out a persistent lack of support in local churches and at the regional conference level. For instance, numerous women shared examples of superintendents or conference staff with an unwillingness to push back against churches closed off to women candidates:

During my superintendent interviews while in seminary, the superintendent of [one regional] conference told me he would not be passing my Covenant profile on to many churches in his conference because “they would rip it up in my face.” He did not follow this reflection with any kind of action steps he or the conference was making to educate in this area. Needless to say, I found this interaction unhelpful, frustrating, and disappointing.

While superintendents may be trying to protect women from a potentially toxic experience, they are maintaining the status quo within conferences by allowing churches to comfortably remain in the denomination despite a conflicting stance on women’s ordination.

Additionally, women have struggled in finding jobs and are concerned over the underrepresentation of women at all levels of leadership, spanning congregations, regional conferences, denominational offices, and ECC events such as Midwinter and CHIC. Respondents commented on the fact that, currently, only one woman serves as conference superintendent. Women also expressed significant disappointment that not all churches, fellow clergy, and speakers at denominational events support women in ministry, with statements such as, “It is still accepted that churches do not have to embrace or even believe the biblical teaching on women as pastors.” And finally, clergywomen shared general concern over the broader culture within the denomination, describing the ECC as a “good old boys’ club” and critiquing the persistent use of masculine language:

Even after I had been serving at my first church for many years, I served on the search committee for a new senior pastor and discovered that we had been using all male pronouns in our job descriptions for many years. I think that often there is simply very little awareness among church leaders about the extent to which...biases limit the ability of women to live out a call to ministry.

These points of discouragement reflect how the ECC, while encouraging in many ways to clergywomen, must also wrestle with the covert and underlying ways its structure and culture are gendered, creating complex barriers for women to pursue and be affirmed at all levels of leadership.

Analysis: Aligning Structural and Cultural Solutions within Congregational Polity

If there was a five-fold test which included the diversity of gender as well as ethnicity, we would have made more inroads than we have after forty years. Where is the strategy at the denominational level to increase the visibility of women leaders in the ECC? Where is the president speaking and encouraging this priority and distinctive of our denomination?

Although ECC clergywomen share a diverse range of views, what is clear among the majority of respondents (90 percent) is that the ECC could do more to support women in ministry. In stating what she sees as the key issue holding back clergywomen in the ECC, one woman argued,

Obviously there continues to be a large disconnect between the denomination's support of women and the local church's support of women. I heard someone say once that male pastors need to do the work of preparing their churches for the next pastor they have to be female. I think there is great truth in that.

This statement exemplifies much of what is at the heart of the ECC's struggle to further advance the leadership of women. Joy Charlton's research illustrates that denominations in which congregations select pastors (as opposed to denominations in which clergy are appointed by leaders outside of the congregation) represent contexts where clergywomen encounter greater difficulties.³⁰ Within the ECC, when congregations have the power to call their own pastors, they simultaneously have the power to alter

30 Charlton, "Clergywomen of the Pioneer Generation," 606.

conventional leadership structures. When those congregations overlook women—whether because they oppose women’s ordination or because they are simply following historical, cultural patterns—there is little the denomination can do beyond encouragement. Survey respondents appeared well aware of the limits of the ECC’s congregational polity. Yet there are other avenues—both structural and cultural—through which the ECC can more fully and unequivocally support and advocate on behalf of clergywomen.

Structural Solutions

With roughly half of clergywomen securing ministry positions through means other than the traditional call process, the ECC should expand its advocacy efforts in accordance with the patterns shown here. As a respondent pointed out, adding names into a call process only goes so far, and other pastors and leaders have a responsibility to think broadly about advocacy:

There is some talk from the higher ups that we support women, but there is still A LOT of churches that would not hire a female pastor. There needs to be more done to educate churches that women are called and gifted. Superintendents need to do more to help churches understand this and not just stick in one female name that automatically gets rejected in the call process. Male pastors need to teach their churches that women can be pastors. When a male pastor is called to move on from a church he should know that the church is closer to accepting women in ministry, otherwise he has done his sisters in ministry and the church a disservice.

The ECC’s Commission on Biblical Gender Equality is currently developing a program called Project Deborah to encourage clergy and laypeople across the denomination to identify, affirm, and mentor young women who show an interest, gifting, or calling to ministry. A clergywoman spoke about mentoring a young woman in her congregation, reinforcing the value of such efforts:

I have had in my own church, a young woman I mentored who upon learning more of the Bible and the call of women told me she now understood that in her attraction to youth ministry, she could now be the youth pastor and not just the youth pastor’s wife. This reflects the importance of mentoring at the local church level.

Mentorship training and programs should be broadcast widely and intentionally integrated into ECC events and professional development opportunities. The denomination should make such training a requirement, ensuring all clergy are, at the very least, exposed to denominational mentoring efforts and recognize mentoring as an integral part of ministry.

Beyond mentoring future clergy, congregations—particularly those reluctant to hire women—need mentorship as well. One respondent shared her experience of being mentored by a lead pastor who also positively formed the congregation on women’s ordination:

[The] lead pastor led by example and taught on the gifted and called nature of my ministry. He was serious about mentoring me and giving me all the space I needed to bring creative ministry to our community. He also very publicly allowed himself to be taught by me.

By thinking broadly about what it means to be a leader and a mentor, this lead pastor helped develop a context in which this clergywoman could thrive and be affirmed. Further, this expanded approach helps shift the overall culture within a congregation and the larger denomination.

Mentorship, job prospects, and career advancement all depend on building relationships; therefore, expanding opportunities to build social capital is another way the ECC can look beyond the call process in efforts to advocate for women. One survey respondent, reflecting on her own “outsider” status, wrote,

Clergywomen (though not exclusively) often find themselves in ministry “outside the box,” and I feel our system doesn’t have many ways to support that. I hear others in situations similar to mine say they don’t get mailings or other communication. Our conferences are very oriented to parish ministry, and extremely expensive, whether for individuals or even for nonprofits like mine to pay for.

The denomination cannot require clergy to attend certain events, but it can expand offerings and consider ways to more effectively build social and professional networks that could (and often do, as found in this study) lead to ministry opportunities. And recognizing that clergywomen identified people and relationships as valuable sources of encouragement, expanding social networks is as much about affirmation as it is about jobs.

As stated, respondents critiqued the lack of women in visible positions of leadership, at the denominational level and particularly as speakers

at events like Midwinter and CHIC. That women remain the minority across the ECC means current clergywomen have fewer role models and advocates, but also that young girls and women lack models that affirm—through presence and message—their own emerging calls to ministry. One respondent stated,

I heard someone say once that you can learn a lot about an organization, or church, from their gathered events. If this is true, then our big events, namely CHIC and Midwinter, have a lot to be desired for women in ministry. How will young women know that their home denomination supports them in their call to ministry when they don't see this reflected at camp and CHIC?

The limitations of congregational polity mean denomination leaders cannot simply place women in pastoral positions, but they can place women in other, visible leadership roles. A clergywoman noted, “During my licensing interview, [the superintendent] made a point of acknowledging and apologizing for the fact that it was on [sic] men on the committee. I so appreciate that. That was and is hard.” Although this woman saw the superintendent's recognition of the problem as affirming, these are areas in which conference or denominational staff have the capacity to ensure more balanced representation. Reaching out to women as candidates for boards and committees, workshop facilitators, and keynote speakers at denominational events sends a positive message and alters the perceptions around clergy and leadership in the church. In addressing this concern, a respondent urged,

Be bold! Hire women! Get more women from WITHIN the ECC speaking at Youth Workers Connection and Midwinter. When there are five evenings of speakers at CHIC, have a MINIMUM of two women as main speakers. Put women in front, give them pastoral duties, and don't let people bully you with phrases like “we tried finding women to speak but there just weren't enough qualified women. . . .” How are we to ever become qualified if we're not given the chance and put in positions??

Being bold according to clergywomen in this study also involves challenging congregations and other clergy who do not support women in ministry: “All lead pastors and congregation[s] should support and affirm women in ministry if that is what we do as a denomination. They

should not get a choice. They then should choose another denomination.” Clergywomen expressed frustration with the willingness to accommodate complementarian clergy or congregations at the expense of clergywomen. Overall, the women in this study are seeking intentional, clear messages and actions from the ECC that unequivocally reflect where the denomination stands. The denomination should critically examine where it can be bold and seriously consider this call to action from clergywomen.

Finally, structural solutions acknowledging and addressing demands outside the workplace also serve as important avenues to better support and advocate for clergywomen. Sociologist Pamela Stone suggests that women do not always willingly choose full-time parenting over careers but instead respond to complex pushes and pulls between work and family life.³¹ Again, as the survey data showed, women do not typically leave ministry for a single reason, but rather an interaction between several factors. One clergywoman’s story highlighted such nuances:

When I was pregnant with my first child, my husband and I were in the process of completing the training to be church planters, but when it was time to interview with the church plant members, I was told by the superintendent and church planting people that I shouldn’t expect to be considered as a co-pastor. I was disappointed, but I chose to focus on my baby. Since that time, my husband has served as pastor in rural churches, and I haven’t submitted my profile to co-pastor alongside him. It took me quite a few years to be okay with this.

This particular story is one where a clergywoman did not “opt out” intentionally, but rather made a choice within her available options.³²

Caring for family is, indeed, a fulfilling and worthwhile path that deserves affirmation. Yet are women leaving (or not even entering) the call process or ministry due to family responsibilities? Would more women combine ministry and parenting (or other family or personal responsibilities) if doing so was more accepted and accessible? One pastor shared her experience of pastoring a church with no family leave policy:

31 Pamela Stone, *Opting Out? Why Women Really Quit Careers and Head Home* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

32 Opting out refers to women who choose full-time parenting over work in the paid labor force. The term stems from Lisa Belkin’s October 26, 2003, article in the *New York Times*, “The Opt Out Revolution,” <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/10/26/magazine/the-opt-out-revolution.html>.

[M]y most insightful challenge revolved around maternity leave. The church had never had to deal with maternity leave before and wasn't sure where to start. I am aware of other fellow women in ministry having the same issues and having to help their church leadership create guidelines for such instances.

A congregation without a maternity or family leave policy is making clear assumptions about its pastoral staff and putting women in the awkward and inappropriate position of having to advocate for their own family leave.³³ These are important questions the ECC should explore in greater depth and consider how to clear paths for clergywomen (and men) to flourish in work, family, and personal life. All people—women and men, parents and non-parents, single and married—desire and deserve a life outside of work and the capacity to care for loved ones and be present in relationships. And all people desire and deserve the chance to pursue career and vocation. There is no simple solution to help people manage competing demands, but establishing a denominationwide policy on family leave is an excellent starting place. Instead of falling behind secular workplaces, the ECC (and the church more broadly) should be leading the way on this issue, setting the highest standard for family support by offering its clergy effective options for maternity, paternity, and general family leave.

Cultural Solutions: “Leaning In” from All Directions

Alongside these structural solutions, advocacy and support strategies must also include efforts to shift the culture of the ECC and the status quo of male leadership. Broader research on clergywomen addresses how ministry has become gendered, with perceptions of clergywomen and the positions they hold following cultural stereotypes.³⁴ This is clear in the ECC, as women remain concentrated in historically gendered roles like Christian formation, family ministry, and pastoral care, or are overlooked for positions for gendered reasons, as one woman shared:

In looking for a first call, I had conversations with some superintendents who were honest with me about the fact that I'd

33 Churches without a family leave policy not only create challenges for expectant mothers, but also exclude men from paternity leave, and exclude both women and men from other care work, such as assisting an aging or ill parent.

34 Paula Nesbitt, *Feminization of the Clergy in America: Occupational and Organizational Perspectives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

likely face some difficulty in finding churches open to female pastors in their conferences. I was glad for their honesty, but saddened by that reality. One church [in a specific state] I spoke with decided not to continue in the process with me because they “were concerned that my husband wouldn’t be able to find a good job in the area.” I think the reality was that my gifts didn’t fit their needs, or they weren’t really open to a female pastor and were afraid to say it.

Gender has served and continues to serve as a point of contention within evangelical traditions and remains a dominant aspect of cultural conflict, particularly around women in leadership, teaching, and preaching positions.³⁵ And when women are passed over for jobs due to family related assumptions, there is a clear need to challenge such structures.

Sheryl Sandberg, chief operating officer at Facebook and author of the bestselling book *Lean In*,³⁶ argues that women are underrepresented at the highest levels of leadership in part because they do not push forward, aim higher, and actively pursue greater challenges and opportunities. While her arguments carry limitations, including race and class biases and the underlying assumption that women are responsible for gender inequality,³⁷ the concept of “leaning in” offers a useful metaphor for shifting the gendered culture of leadership in the ECC. How can the denomination foster a context in which women think and act broadly in pursuing a call to ministry—leaning into expanded visions of women in ministry—and how can local churches, regional conferences, and denominational administrators respond by expanding their images of pastor, preacher, teacher, and leader?

Recognizing the goals women set for ministry and how few aim for solo and senior pastor roles even as they move through their careers, the ECC should consider efforts to form and support women in identifying goals based on ministry gifts and calling, not on gendered expectations. Whether a woman is called to serve in pastoral care or as lead pastor of a multi-staff church, she should have support to pursue her call regard-

35 Julie Ingersoll, *Evangelical Christian Women: War Stories in the Gender Battles* (New York: New York University Press, 2003).

36 Sheryl Sandberg, *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013).

37 bell hooks, “Dig Deep: Beyond Lean In,” *The Feminist Wire*, October 28, 2013, <http://www.thefeministwire.com/2013/10/17973>.

less of gender.³⁸ A clergywoman shared her sense of affirmation, having moved into a position toward which she had felt called, stating, “I have finally been given the responsibility I knew I was capable of. I have trust and autonomy in my work and wonderfully supportive coworkers with whom I can collaborate.” Here is a woman who is thriving rather than compromising, a result of opportunities to pursue her calling and not be limited by gender. As stated throughout this discussion, such arguments are not meant to diminish the importance of formation or pastoral care roles, but rather to question why women are so heavily concentrated in such positions.

Encouraging women to develop a broader vision of ministry is, of course, only part of the story. If women pursue solo and senior pastor roles, regional conferences, local churches, and denominational leaders also need broadened perspectives. For example, numerous women felt overlooked for senior pastor roles, even those who have ministry experience:

I have felt a glass ceiling. Getting a first call out of seminary was not terribly difficult, but for myself and other women who have had several years of experience, there are very few opportunities. Those churches who have multiple staff and can pay decently will gravitate toward a male who is married and fits the image of a traditional pastor. Also having been a solo pastor, churches with staff don't see me as having experience with a staff and being able to lead as a senior pastor.

Responsibility lies with colleagues, too, as women frequently pointed out the challenges in finding acceptance and legitimacy among clergymen:

My experiences with the denomination have been positive. I have, however, had experiences with my male colleagues that tend to minimize my voice or engage me in conversations completely different than they would with their male peers. They don't discuss theology with me, for example, but they will talk with me about their kids.

Clergymen must share in the responsibility of challenging the gendered culture of ministry in the ECC, or else change will not occur. Indeed, women pointed out the particular value in men supporting their call. As one stated, “Many men have stepped aside so that my voice may be

38 Similarly, men should be encouraged to follow gifting over gendered expectations. Shifting and broadening perspectives opens up greater opportunities for all clergy.

heard.” Another shared the encouragement of “strong male leaders who speak up and normalize ministry without making it a big deal. They treat me like a normal colleague—an equal.” But women frequently expressed a desire for more consistent and concerted effort among male colleagues: “Sad looks from male colleagues and shrugs from superintendents about congregations that won’t accept a woman pastor get pretty old. Step up, gentlemen, and give us a chance to serve.” Along with advocating for women in ministry, mentoring, and shifting the culture within the churches or ministries they serve, day-to-day interactions on a collegial level require an openness to women, and men must examine how their ideas and actions perpetuate problems for clergywomen.

Individual and institutional changes go hand-in-hand. Expanding the perspectives of clergy, laypeople, and other leaders informs broader cultural patterns, just as the culture of an institution impacts how people think and act. In other words, women’s interactions with laypeople, clergy, and leaders cannot be separated from the gendered culture within some ECC churches and institutions, as shown here:

I am still seeking a call. I’m on to the third round of interviews next week at a local church. Everything about the position looks like a potential match, but they, despite looking for an MDiv, ordination, three to five years’ experience, preaching, care, and discipleship responsibilities, they want to call it a director, not a pastor. The elephant in the room is gender.

Similarly, as noted above, perspectives on women in ministry expand when people experience a woman in pastoral or ministry leadership, but clergywomen need opportunities in order for this change to occur.³⁹ An ECC clergywoman’s comment reflected another way individual and institutional cultural change are intertwined:

While I originally sought calls as a solo pastor, people encouraged me to seek a lead pastor role because they saw strong leadership skills in me. The church in which I currently serve was not considering a female pastor at first, but as they entered the call process they sensed God calling them to be more open to this. They intentionally entered into a Bible study on “Called & Gifted” (under encouragement by the male interim and associate pastors). In time we all felt that I was the pastor who was called to this church. Since being called,

39 Edward C. Lehman, *Women Clergy: Breaking Through Gender Barriers* (New Brunswick: Transaction, Inc., 1985).

some people have shared that they voted against my call at first because of my gender, but still stayed at the church. They now are some of my best supporters!

This congregation, initially reluctant to let this pastor live into her call, eventually transitioned to a welcoming and supportive stance. But cultural change is only possible if women have adequate opportunities to serve. Indeed, survey respondents shared inspiring stories of finding fulfillment in their call, and not all wish to move beyond their current roles. But there are, at the same time, women who desire something different yet feel limited, such as one who was told she should “consider curtailing” her ambitions.

Overall, the denomination, regional conferences, and local churches need to strike the appropriate balance between a gender-neutral view (which overlooks some of the unique gifts, experiences, and styles of leadership women offer) and one in which gender is a determining factor in the types of ministry roles clergy secure. Wallace, for instance, found that women have a more collaborative, team-oriented leadership style in religious institutions, which, when brought into a church, had positive effects on the laypeople and the general culture of a congregation.⁴⁰ Any institution does itself a disservice when notions of “leadership” are limited to just a few characteristics and, in turn, only a percentage of the population. Expanding vision from all angles through cultural transformation benefits clergywomen called and gifted to a diverse range of ministry roles and benefits ECC churches with more diverse pastoral staffs.

Conclusion: Opportunity over Obstacle

In previous discourse on women’s ordination, Deasy has argued that the ECC needs to move beyond theological debates and unequivocally stand firm in its position that both women and men are equally called and gifted to ministry.⁴¹ In my own work, I have made the case that by not actively, intentionally creating ways to keep called and gifted women in the ECC by challenging limitations placed on them, the denomination problematizes women rather than the discrimination or barriers they

40 Wallace, *They Call Her Pastor*; cf. Barbara Brown Zikmund, Adair T. Lummis, and Patricia Mei Yin Chang, *Clergy Women: An Uphill Calling* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998).

41 Jo Ann Deasy, “Reframing the Issue: Women’s Ordination in the ECC,” *Covenant Quarterly* 67, no. 2 (2009): 3–25.

face in attempting to live out a call to vocational ministry.⁴² In other words, the ECC places the burden on clergywomen to navigate both a structure and culture that are not yet willing to fully embrace their gifts and callings. One respondent's story reflected the weariness that comes with persevering amid pushback:

When I went through the interview process the search team fully endorsed me as the candidate, but the council was six in favor and four opposed because I was a woman. The lead and executive pastors asked me if I would be willing to take preaching off the job description because they did not think the vote would pass because of those that do not believe a woman should be a pastor. I agreed to come under those conditions. I was called with a vote of 72 percent. I was told that we would continue to have conversation about preaching and that I would be able to participate in all other pastoral duties. A year later I am still not participating in communion in the traditional service and there is no conversation about preaching. We have had twelve to fifteen families leave the church because I am a female pastor. Those opposed to a female pastor continue to have a loud voice. I am trying to stay faithful in order to pave the way for women in this context but I am weary and I am not sure what the future holds.

The present study shows some positive growth, with women moving into second, third, and fourth calls and beyond, finding affirmation from a range of sources along the way. And women like the one quoted here are instrumental in assuring future generations will find a smoother path, even as they face a difficulty journey. But while we should not overlook the contrasts between the stories of discouragement shared in earlier decadal studies and the numerous women who indicated in this study fulfillment and support in their work, the structural and cultural barriers that exist for clergywomen can and should be challenged.

If the ECC only draws from half the population to lead its churches, is the denomination truly the best it can be? Are denominational leaders looking beyond the limits of congregational polity and seriously considering ways they can openly and boldly advocate for the exceptional women who are called and gifted to serve the ECC? The structural and

42 Lenore Knight Johnson, "Organic Transformation or Legislated Change? Women's Ordination in the Evangelical Covenant Church" (master's thesis, Loyola University Chicago, 2005).

cultural changes proposed in this article cannot be viewed as obstacles or burdens but rather as opportunities to make a thriving denomination even stronger. To be sure, change is difficult and often a slow, arduous process. But if the ECC is committed to the position it affirmed in 1976, the denomination and all those who comprise it need to determine if they are willing to do the hard work necessary to keep and support extraordinarily gifted people, create paths toward all levels of leadership, and ensure clergywomen can thrive in all realms of daily life—spiritual, personal, and professional. Until then, these same questions and issues will likely remain for another decade and beyond.