

Five Decades Later: Clergywomen in The Evangelical Covenant Church (1976–2026)

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The experiences of clergywomen in the Evangelical Covenant Church (the Covenant) have been shaped by five decades of slow, steady progress. At the fifty-year mark I am struck by our continued commitment to understanding where we are now on this issue, rather than simply being content not to be where we were. Joy Charlton rightly notes that the subject of women's ordination has lost attention over time as women serving in professional ministry have become more commonplace in many denominations.¹ In the 1970s and '80s as more denominations made historic votes to ordain women, this topic was of utmost interest. Even into the 1990s examining how women were faring in denominations that had made such a move occupied much space in academic journals.

These studies revealed what we have seen borne out in our own denomination, that while more and more women were entering professional ministry, progress toward parity with their male counterparts was slow in coming.² Most often, clergywomen held subordinate rather than lead pastoral roles,³ and those roles themselves were often gendered (e.g., children's pastor).⁴ This in large part reflects the mismatch that exists between denominational commitments and congregational norms and preferences.⁵ As is true for many other denominations that officially

1 Joy C. Charlton, "Revisiting Gender and Religion," *Review of Religious Research*, 57, no. 3 (2015), 334–335.

2 Paul Sullins, "The Stained-Glass Ceiling: Career Attainment for Women Clergy," *Sociology of Religion*, 61, no. 3 (2000), 245.

3 Sullins, 245–256.

4 Jimi Adams, "Stained Glass Makes the Ceiling Visible: Organizational Opposition to Women in Congregational Leadership," *Gender and Society*, 21, no. 1 (2007), 82.

5 Mark Chaves, *Ordaining Women* (Harvard University Press, 1997), 89.

recognize the importance of the full participation of women in every area of professional ministry, women's experience of that participation in the Covenant varies in practice from congregation to congregation.

In 2026, as we reflect on where we have been and celebrate the good progress we have made, I am thankful that the Covenant has continued to be a denomination that attends "to what comes later, afterwards, to what directions change, and shift."⁶ We have faithfully attended to what comes after the vote, after the act of naming something as important. We have chosen to hold ourselves accountable to becoming who we have said we want to be. It is my hope that it will be with that posture that this work is received.

Where Have We Been?

The present study builds upon a long tradition of decadal research documenting the realities of Covenant clergywomen, beginning with the pioneering work of Mary C. Miller in 1988,⁷ and extending through Isolde Anderson (1998),⁸ Amanda Olson and Mae Cannon (2007),⁹ and Lenore M. Knight Johnson (2017).¹⁰ Miller's foundational study revealed the severe constraints faced by the first generation of Covenant clergywomen. Ten years after the vote to ordain women, fewer than one-third of early graduates obtained pastoral positions in Covenant congregations. Of those who did, more than one-third eventually left those positions. The experiences of that early cohort of women were characterized by chronic placement difficulties, lack of institutional support, and overt gender discrimination.¹¹ Notably, women who graduated earlier in the decade experienced markedly better placement outcomes, suggesting that initial denominational enthusiasm waned over time.¹² Miller's participants consistently expressed pessimism about the Covenant's practical commitment to women in ministry, despite formal theological affirmation.

6 Charlton, 335.

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

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

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 Lenore M. Knight Johnson, "Four Decades Later: Credentialed Clergywomen in the Evangelical Covenant Church." *Covenant Quarterly* 75, no. 1 (2017), 3-29.

11 Miller, 9-11.

12 Miller, 8-9.

A decade later, Isolde Anderson replicated Miller's methodology and found that many of the same barriers persisted. Women continued to encounter discriminatory attitudes from superintendents and search committees. Placement remained the single greatest obstacle to sustained vocational ministry.¹³ Anderson's study characterized the denomination's stance as supportive of women's ordination in theory but not in practice. While the Covenant officially affirmed women's ordination, practical follow-through at the conference and congregational levels lagged significantly. However, her study also documented early signs of progress. More women were staying in ministry positions and moving to second and third calls. Overall, female clergy in the Covenant held perceptions of increased support and acceptance in comparison to ten years earlier.

By the third decadal study, Amanda Olson and Mae Cannon, employing a completely different study design, surveyed a substantially larger population of clergywomen, allowing for a more comprehensive assessment of trends across the denomination. Their findings showed notable improvement in perceptions of denominational support. Only 12 percent of respondents reported a negative view of the Covenant's relationship with women in ministry, a significant shift from earlier decades.¹⁴ However, the researchers also documented persistent underrepresentation in lead roles and ongoing difficulties at the conference level, especially related to advocacy around placement and practical support.¹⁵

Lenore Knight Johnson's fourth decadal study was the most comprehensive. She expanded the both the scope of the survey and the sample.¹⁶ Hers was the first since Miller's study to ask about the financial health of women. Her survey also provided a more comprehensive look at how Covenant clergywomen navigated the call process. With regard to sample size, hers was the largest to date, with 224 respondents.¹⁷

The fourth decadal survey confirmed ongoing but uneven progress. More women were now moving into second, third, and fourth calls, signaling increased career stability. Overall perceptions of denominational support continue to improve.¹⁸ Yet the core structural barriers originally identified by Miller remain largely unchanged: regional conference dynamics continue to impede equitable placement, and women remained

13 Anderson, 23–26.

14 Olson and Cannon, 49.

15 Olson and Cannon, 49.

16 Knight Johnson, 8–10.

17 Knight Johnson, 8–10.

18 Knight Johnson, 13–17.

underrepresented in senior or solo pastoral roles.¹⁹

In addition to the key findings of Knight Johnson's study, hers was the first to introduce the concept of intersectionality into these decadal surveys, attending not only to gender but also to race in her analysis. Only 10 percent of those who responded to her survey identified as women of color.²⁰ Knight Johnson named the importance of attending to the subject of race when discussing Covenant clergywomen's experiences. She found that women of color reported distinct challenges within the call process, congregational culture, and denominational systems, underscoring the need for more nuanced and inclusive research and policy reform.

The present study builds on the survey Knight Johnson created for the fourth decadal study and examines the educational pathways, ministry roles, call-process engagement, and professional experiences of Covenant clergywomen. Building on past scholarship, this research seeks not only to document continued patterns of inequality but also to assess where meaningful progress has occurred and where systemic change remains urgently needed.

Methodology

This study draws upon an online survey administered via Survey Monkey between June and September 2025. The survey assessed theological education, ministerial roles, credentialing status, denominational engagement, call-process navigation, support structures, compensation, factors contributing to vocational transitions and, following Knight Johnson, also asked for demographic information such as race and marital status.

North Park Theological Seminary (NPTS) assisted in disseminating the survey through promotional flyers, faculty distribution at Gather 2025, and digital communication. Additional distribution occurred through the Covenant's Serve Globally and Advocates for Covenant Clergy Women (ACCW) networks, as well as peer-to-peer sharing among clergywomen. A total of 129 clergywomen and ministry leaders responded to the survey with most completing it. One significant limitation is that the survey was, again, in English only. The factors that led to this were my very limited Spanish as well as time and resource constraints that did not allow me to collaborate with a skilled translator.

Of the 129 respondents, 77.3 percent currently serve in paid ministerial positions, and 73.4 percent serve in Covenant-affiliated contexts.

¹⁹ Knight Johnson, 10–11.

²⁰ Knight Johnson, 8.

Credentialing levels were high: 55 percent are ordained to word and sacrament, 17.5 percent to word and service, 9 percent are pursuing ordination, and 16 percent hold licenses. A small number hold specialized ministry credentials or have retired credentials.

The median age of respondents is fifty. Approximately 75 percent are married, and more than half of those married have spouses outside of ministry. Of the 105 who responded to the race question, 81 percent identify as white, 9 percent Asian, 8 percent Black, 3 percent Hispanic, 1 percent Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and 1 percent multiracial. These demographic patterns align closely with prior decadal studies and further highlight ongoing underrepresentation of women of color in Covenant ministry.

Survey Results

Theological Education as a Ministry Pathway. Of the women surveyed, over 90 percent attended seminary and just under 90 percent graduated. About 54 percent have an MDiv degree, about 16 percent have earned the Master of Arts in Christian Formation (MACF) degree, and eight percent the Master of Arts in Theological Studies (MATS) degree. Others reported having MA degrees in other fields (e.g., counseling), or Master level certificates (e.g., the Certificate in Spiritual Direction from the Weborg Center). Three percent have a DMin degree.

Notably, only about 41 percent of these women attended NPTS. The other 59 percent attended a range of seminaries not affiliated with the Evangelical Covenant Church. Of those, Fuller Theological Seminary, was the highest reported (about 14 percent), followed by Bethel Seminary (<1 percent), and Regent College (<1 percent).

What Ministry Roles Do Clergywomen Hold? As compared to previous decadal surveys, the data indicates that the Covenant has made the most progress here. Of the 107 women who answered this question, more women (36 percent) are serving in lead roles, defined as solo, lead, co-lead, or executive pastor than are serving in associate pastoral roles (22 percent). In the previous decadal study only 24 percent of respondents were serving in lead roles as defined in this study.²¹ Of those serving as associate pastors, worship, discipleship and formation, or family ministries are the dominant areas.

21 Knight Johnson did not include co-pastors (4 percent) in her count. Excluding them, she reported 20 percent of respondents as serving in lead roles. Knight Johnson, "Four Decades Later," 10.

About 12 percent of clergywomen are serving as chaplains, about 9 percent are serving at the conference level, 4 percent in parachurch ministries, and the remaining 17 percent in other ministries such as camping ministry.

The shift in representation of women in lead pastoral roles is an encouraging sign and should be celebrated. However, there is evidence that women are still facing significant barriers. Several women reported serving in churches where they were doing pastoral work but not being recognized as a pastor. One woman shared, “I was co-leading the church, but the council didn’t want to call it that because I was a woman.” Similarly, open-ended responses suggest that the high percentage of women who are serving outside the congregational setting are doing so because they have found congregational ministry closed or marginalizing. This pattern reflects long-standing concerns raised in prior studies and highlights persistent inequities in role recognition.

In What Size Churches Do Women Serve and in What Roles? Nearly half (47 percent) of clergywomen serving in congregational settings in the Covenant continue to serve in churches with congregations under one hundred people. In general, as church size increases, women are more likely to be in associate or staff roles rather than lead roles. However, the notable exception are churches with large congregations of four hundred or more. Women holding lead pastoral roles in Covenant churches tend to be serving in churches with the largest (400+) and smallest (under 100) congregations.

How Do Women’s Preferences Align with the Ministry Roles They Secure? Half of all women entering the call process were seeking a lead, a senior, or a co-pastor role. This is a significant finding given historical patterns in the placement of women in Covenant churches and ministries. Just over one-third sought associate/assistant roles. This includes those seeking developmental or team-based pastoral roles.

How Do Women Find and Secure Ministry Positions? In each of the four previous studies, the call process has been identified as a significant hurdle for Covenant clergywomen. This was identified as a significant factor in the underrepresentation of women in lead roles. In this survey 62 percent (n=72) of women who graduated from seminary reported not entering the call process. Among those, many reported having secured a ministry role outside of the call process as the reason. For some they were invited to apply for a position by a church with which they were already connected as in the case of the respondent who wrote, “a part time position came to me, so I bypassed the call process.”

Another shared that she “was invited to apply for several positions. Did not need to enter the process.” Still others were already serving in paid ministry positions while in seminary and applied for more senior positions upon graduation. One woman shared, “I applied to be lead pastor at the church where I was associate.”

Coupled with this, other responses to the question of why women did not enter the call process clustered around denominational culture, limited perceived opportunities for women, and clearer vocational fit in other settings (especially chaplaincy and nonprofit work). Taken together and especially given the number of women serving in lead roles as compared to associate roles, it appears that many women have found other pathways toward fulfilling their calls to professional ministry.

How Supported Do Women Feel? Responses from the survey indicate that support from conferences drops significantly after the first call, with the second, third, and fourth calls showing much smaller numbers and more mixed experiences. Support from the denomination overall is moderate with most women feeling somewhat or very supported, but a notable minority feel unsupported.

Most women reported feeling strong support from their churches and moderate support from conferences at their first calls. This aligns with the finding that many women are finding their first ministry positions outside of the call process. At second call, support from churches remains solid, but conference level support declines. For third and fourth calls, church support stays generally positive, but conference support becomes mixed, with rising levels of reported unsupportiveness. Across all calls from first to fourth, women reported levels of support from the denomination ranging from very supported to somewhat supported. While most women report feeling at least somewhat supported, with one in eight feeling very supported, 89 percent of respondents felt there was room for growth. The following comments are characteristic of themes present in many open-ended responses:

I wish the regional conference, in facilitating my call process, would have had a more explicit conversation about hiring a female pastor with my church board. When I have struggled because of my gender in my role, I receive empathy, for which I am thankful, but I do not often receive tangible support to ameliorate the situation.

I felt more supported in the call process. Once I became the

pastor, it became clear that some members of my church board were uncomfortable with a female pastor, and they have made my role more challenging to hold. I am also grateful for an active church board, as their leadership gives me the flexibility to care for my child.

Comments like these, coupled with the fact that women who never entered the Covenant call process tend to report slightly higher support scores than those who did enter the process, help us begin to understand what may be happening. Chaves found that “denominational policy often fails to correspond to the actual practice of women in ministry.”²² Paul Sullins and others found that this mismatch between denominational affirmation and the practical experiences of clergywomen is often related to congregational norms that reflect larger sociocultural norms related to women in leadership.²³

The Covenant’s choice to affirm women in ministry but to allow individual congregations to decide whether or not to call women to pastoral roles has resulted in inconsistency. Clergywomen in congregations that have long affirmed women or who have themselves been led by women feel supported, while clergywomen entering congregations where that has not been the case feel unsupported. The result is that women entering the formal structure of the call process, where there is less control and less familiarity with the congregational culture of the calling church, are experiencing more challenges. In contrast, women who are hired relationally or directly are able to avoid potential friction points in the formal call process.

It should be noted that although the number of women of color who participated in this survey is small, the data suggests that there is not a racial pattern in the difference in support levels.

Where Do Clergywomen Stand Financially? The last decadal study (2017) was the first time that women were asked about salary, benefits, and pension support. At that time 50 percent of the 155 respondents who answered the question were earning \$40,000 per year or less. Twenty-six percent earned between \$40,000 and \$60,000 per year.²⁴ Additionally, at that time half of the women surveyed were serving “in churches or ministries that contributed to the Covenant pension program and an

22 Chaves, 1.

23 Sullins, 243.

24 Knight Johnson, 15.

additional 11 percent received support for a private retirement savings plan.”²⁵

Ten years later there has been progress in this area. Income-wise clergywomen are doing better overall than they were ten years ago. Of the ninety-seven women who responded to this question only about 31 percent (thirty) reported earning less than \$40,000 per year. About 18 percent (seventeen) earn between \$40,000 and \$60,000 per year, and about 15 percent (fifteen) \$60,000 to \$80,000 per year. The majority of women who responded, about 36 percent (thirty-five), are earning \$80,000 or higher per year.

Additionally, about 57 percent (fifty-six) of women report serving in churches or ministries that contribute to the Covenant pension program, and another 17 percent (seventeen) serve in churches or ministries that provide support for a private retirement savings account.

Why Aren't Women Serving in Ministry? In the sample only twenty-nine women were not currently serving in a paid ministry position. Of those twenty-nine, fourteen chose not to state why they were not serving. The majority, 52 percent, of those who are not currently serving in a paid ministry position noted retirement as the reason. Other reasons noted for not serving included burnout, not finding a good ministry fit, and career transition. Each of these was at 10 percent (n=2).

The number of women who cited reasons other than retirement for why they are not serving in a ministry role at this time was small. However, their responses are insightful and may help us better understand the larger picture of Covenant clergywomen and the gendered realities that lead women to leave professional ministry. One respondent wrote:

While I am ordained to Word and Sacrament, there has not been a place where I “fit” into a paid ministry position. *I served for decades in unpaid roles*, while working full-time, but am in a place in my life where I am no longer able to sustain that pace (author’s emphasis).

We know from past studies that clergywomen have been serving in unpaid or underpaid ministry roles for many years. In the last decadal study, Knight Johnson found that half of those surveyed were earning under \$40,000 per year. In this study a number of women reported doing pastoral work but not being formally recognized as pastors in their churches, which means not being paid as a pastor. The above-mentioned quotation points to the toll that has taken over time.

25 Knight Johnson, 15.

Even among the majority who named retirement as the reason for not serving, there is evidence that there may be a gendered component to that data. One respondent shared that she retired because “the demands of ministry and care giving were becoming overwhelming. I needed a wife!” This comment points to the differing forces that might push women out of ministry sooner than, perhaps, their male counterparts. Several women noted care-taking, often for spouses, as their reason for retiring. Arlie Hochschild coined the term “the second shift” to describe the experiences of many working women, referring to the additional, often invisible, domestic and caregiving labor that women are expected to take on in addition to their paid labor.²⁶

The first shift, according to Hochschild is a woman’s paid job, and the second shift is the often invisible load she takes on after work. This work often includes caregiving for children but, as is more often the case for women in the age range of the majority of respondents in this study, can also include aging parents. This additional labor leads to what Hochschild called the leisure gap, which is the disparity between the free time that women have as compared to men. Similar to the impact of decades of unpaid (and underpaid) labor, this comment suggests that the additional labor women are often expected to take on may be a significant force pushing women out of professional ministry.

What Do Covenant Clergywomen Find Encouraging About Ministry? Overwhelmingly, meaningful collaboration and role-modeling came up as themes Covenant clergywomen found encouraging and, conversely, discouraging. Comments like the following were emblematic of the types of responses women offered to this question:

I enjoyed the camaraderie and mutual edification of the former Women Ministries conferences—Triennials. I am blessed by the gatherings of women in ministry and women of color in ministry that take place at Midwinter. I appreciate the emphasis put on the ordination of women as well as the work being done by ACCW.

Importantly this comment touches upon the importance of both formal and informal pathways for women to identify role models and build collaborative relationships in the Covenant. Conferences such as

26 Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The Second Shift* (Viking, 1989), 4.

the previous Triennial and the programing sponsored by the ACCW are among those formal pathways.

Similarly, the comments below highlight how important it has been for women to have a generation of female leaders before them who have paved a way for the next generation:

I love that there are other female leaders above me that are setting the path for women in ministry and challenging me in my call. I can see the work the denomination has done and the women before me that have carved the path. I have been surrounded by males and females who support and push me in my calling.

This comment highlights the importance of having women as role models and points to the benefits not only for women who have discerned a call to professional ministry but also for men and women more broadly speaking who provide affirmation and support to clergywomen. This latter point is exemplified in this response by a clergywoman who wrote:

I love meeting young people who have had female pastors in the ECC, because they are not surprised to see women preach and lead. They have been around it most or all of their lives.

What Do Covenant Clergywomen Find Discouraging? In response to what women find discouraging in ministry, unsurprisingly many women named continued challenges in the call process. One woman wrote, “So many women have negative experiences when they candidate for pastoral roles in our churches.” Another shared:

Having churches in search process refuse to look at my profile. Having questions about the legitimacy of women’s ordination occasionally pop up from the floor at Gather. It is rare but whenever it happens I think, “Where have you been the last 50 years?! Why do you think this is appropriate to ask in this forum?” Seeing Covenant colleagues uplift the voices of popular public pastors, leaders, or figures who do NOT believe women should be pastors without giving that caveat.

This comment highlights both the kinds of negative experiences women report having related to the call process and what another woman speaking of her experience called “the subtle experiences of sexism, [and] the micro-aggressions of those who think I’m ok but I’d be better if I were a man.”

Relatedly, many women reported feeling very discouraged that, as one woman put it, “there are still many churches/pastors/etc. in the Covenant that do not embrace women in ministry.” Still others shared frustration that, as another wrote, “local churches are [able] to... discount clergywomen from consideration.”

Other comments subtly reveal how harmful these experiences are to clergywomen. One woman shared that having “no real spots and no follow up with churches that still are complementarian” was what frustrated her most in ministry. Here, a woman who has discerned a call to ministry has been left feeling like there is “no real spot” for her. While many of the women who did not enter the call process reported having secured a ministry role outside of that formal process, several reported not entering the call process because they perceived that they would experience exactly what has been described above. This perception matters.

Lastly, another category of responses centered on the lack of peers. One woman shared that what she has found frustrating has been:

Struggling to find other women in my life stage, also serving in ministry. I have...young kids and did seminary and ordination while having children. It can feel like I'm the only one doing that and close to full-time ministry at the same time.

This quote highlights the result of the Covenant's slow fifty-year progress toward having more women in lead positions in the church. The common thread in comments related to what women found encouraging is that women are encouraged by seeing other women in ministry, especially those who are more seasoned. The above quote highlights what happens when that is not the case. When there are not women at various life stages, visibly serving in professional ministry, and especially in lead roles, women struggle to see themselves, which can be an isolating experience.

Where Do We Go from Here? The findings of this study demonstrate both progress and persistent challenges for clergywomen in the Evangelical Covenant Church. While women now increasingly serve in senior leadership roles and report stronger congregational support, structural barriers remain embedded in conference-level processes, role recognition, and denominational systems.

As long as we continue as a denomination to allow congregations to choose not to call women to lead roles, our progress in this area will be slow, steady perhaps, but slow. The challenges that women continue to name with the call process are evidence. The following quote from one

woman exemplifies what is at the heart of this issue. She writes:

A lot of people in leadership (often men) tout how “we just need more women in lead pastor roles.” I do not think that’s our solution, actually I think it could harm more women who are being thrust into positions (to make the optics and numbers look better) before churches are ready for them. Personally, I would never take a lead pastor call at a church that wasn’t seriously, seriously ready for me. Never having had other female pastoral staff would be a red flag.

This comment highlights both the structural limitations within the call process and the consequences of our current system. Fifty years later there are still women who are having to endure the cost to their mental, emotional, and physical health that comes with being the first. The other side of that coin, which is often not discussed, is that this means that fifty years later, there are young women and girls who are still receiving the message that God does not call women to pastoral ministry.

It is clear the need for structural changes continues. However, these changes need to be targeted toward achieving cultural change. In other words, it is not going to be enough to create policy that will make the call process work better for women; we have to strategically address the persistent attitudes within our denomination that women do not belong in the pulpit. This may, as one woman wrote, look like formal and required training of “male colleagues to notice and call out casual sexism and sexist patterns, especially in each other.”

Additionally, the findings suggest that perhaps another way forward may be found on the margins. Those women who have carved a way for themselves outside of the call process have done so by relying on one of the things that has long made the Evangelical Covenant Church strong: relationships. The question then is how we take that positive attribute and use it to improve our formal structure such that all women, and not just those in supportive congregations, are able to recognize their call. It is not enough for this to remain at the relational level; we must find a way to incorporate this into our systems. That could look like providing training for congregations calling a pastor so that they not only consider a woman but also are prepared to receive her well.

In addition to education, we need to have a clear picture of where we stand. It is imperative that we continue to conduct these surveys of clergywomen every ten years. However, it would also be helpful to have

a better understanding of the landscape where our churches are. How many credentialed clergy do not affirm women in all areas of professional ministry? How many of our congregations would still not call a woman to a lead role?

This survey invites renewed commitment to policy changes, transparent call-process practices, intentional mentorship, and equitable leadership development. As clergywomen look toward the future, many express both hope and urgency—hope grounded in visible progress and urgency born of enduring inequities that continue to shape ministerial life.

Note: This article would not be possible without the work of Alexandria Figueroa who served as the research assistant on this project. I had the pleasure of supervising her master's thesis when she was a student at North Park, and it has been a joy to collaborate with her as a graduate. She devoted countless hours to getting the survey up and running and coding and organizing the data.