
THE COVENANT
QUARTERLY

Spring/Summer 2026

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Comment

*Paul H. de Neui, professor of missiology and intercultural studies,
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At the ninety-first annual meeting of the Evangelical Covenant Church in 1976 held in Tacoma, Washington, Rev. Donald Njaa called for a motion from the floor in favor of the ordination of women to ministry. The motion passed with 70 percent approval, but a proposal to fund the training of churches on this topic failed. Every ten years since 1976, *The Covenant Quarterly* has conducted a survey to see how far this denomination has moved in regard to the actual incorporation of women into pastoral roles in Covenant churches. This issue marks the fifth in that series of surveys.

We gratefully acknowledge the work of North Park Theological Seminary's assistant professor Rev. Dr. Michelle Dodson, who holds the Milton B. Engebretson Chair in Evangelism and Justice, for overseeing this most current decadal study. We know that this work would not have been possible without the capable assistance of Alexandria Figueroa, who served as her research assistant on this project.

As we come to this half-century mark of the Covenant decision to ordain women, we recognize the work that has gone before. Therefore, we have included each of the previous four surveys in this issue as a compendium for historical comparison and a present-day reality check. The *Quarterly* is proud to reprint each of the previous decadal studies documenting the realities of Covenant clergywomen together in this volume, beginning with the pioneering work of Mary C. Miller in 1988, and extending through Isolde Anderson (1998), Amanda Olson and Mae Cannon (2007), and Lenore M. Knight Johnson (2017). Each of these scholar practitioners added a new dimension to help the Covenant see itself more clearly, celebrating steps that have been taken and readily acknowledging the remaining areas of growth.

This volume is dedicated to the support of all whom God has called and gifted, particularly our sisters who faithfully serve in Covenant churches in all eleven conferences of the Covenant and the many who serve globally. We also recognize the many Covenant-ordained clergywomen who serve outside of the Covenant because they have not been able to find suitable positions in their home fellowship but who maintain their credentials in this denominational body while faithfully serving among numerous other denominations and institutions for that very reason. At this benchmark moment we humbly recognize the slow pace of movement toward our professed egalitarian posture.

Jesus's question in Luke 7:44 to Simon the Pharisee is a question to each of us in the Covenant: "Do you see this woman?" The tears, heartache, and frustration of women throughout the centuries continue to pour out at Jesus's feet as they realize their personal freedom and giftedness in Christ while at the same time facing closed doors into professional service in the very churches who claim to ordain them! May the next fifty years bring greater clarity, measurable growth, and even more egalitarian support for Covenant clergywomen to fully live into their calling as essential members of the body of Christ.

In this volume, the editor wishes to thank Rev. Scott Burnett, for his years of service as book review editor of *The Covenant Quarterly*, and we ask God's blessing on him well as he moves into new roles of creative ministerial service in the days ahead. In this issue, we also gratefully acknowledge the enthusiastic energy of Michael A. Walker, our current book review editor. Through his network of connections we are able to present the enlightening and challenging insights of several gifted female reviewers presenting books pertinent to the theme of this issue. It is our hope and desire that these reviews will inspire all our readership to broaden their vision of God's calling and equipping of all whom they serve.

Your comments, feedback, and suggestions are always welcome.

PAUL H. DE NEUI

A Decade Later: North Park Theological Seminary Female M.Div. Graduates (1977–1987)

*Mary C. Miller, Covenant pastor and columnist for
The Covenant Companion, Fort Wayne, Indiana*

Background for Ordination of Women

One Covenant pastor remembers the 1976 vote to ordain women in ministry by observing, “The vote to ordain women was not born of conviction but of exhaustion.”¹

His tongue-in-cheek description is reflected in the minutes of that Annual Meeting. Four and one half pages describe the struggle of the delegates over the Board of the Ministry’s “Divorce and Remarriage—A Policy Statement.” The paper, an update on a 1961 statement, was distributed and read, then extensively debated and amended. Debate continued until there was a motion to let the issue stand recessed until the next day, Friday. The next morning the discussion continued, finally concluding with a closed, paper ballot. A few minutes later the Board of the Ministry presented another paper, a “Statement on the Ordination of Women,” which had been distributed the previous day. It was not read aloud in the meeting, debate was limited to two minutes per speaker, and voting time was predetermined for 11:45 a.m. At that time the statement was approved by voice vote. In contrast to the “Divorce and Remarriage” paper, the one of “Ordination of Women” fills thirty lines of one page in the meeting’s minutes.² In fact, the paper itself is not even recorded there.³ These dozen years since that “exhausted” but historic vote have been formative ones for the acceptance and rejection of women in Covenant ordained ministry. In 1981 a motion to rescind the vote to ordain women was defeated.⁴ The following year, a more extensive rationale for women’s ordination than that of 1976 was presented at the annual ministerium and denominational meeting.⁵ Twenty-three women have been ordained since the original vote.⁶

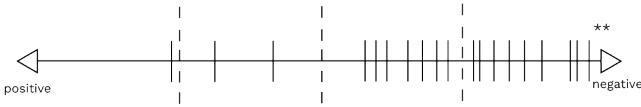
Protocol and Data of Questionnaire

What progress have we made as a denomination in training and placing women in Covenant ministry since the 1976 vote? In April a questionnaire was mailed to the primary sources on the subject.⁷

The sample selected were North Park Theological Seminary women who earned Master of Divinity degrees since the vote who could have entered the placement process (1977 to 1987).⁸ North Park was selected because of its focus on Covenant students and commitment to the denominational placement process during those years. By limiting the sample to the denominational school, the issue of placement could be more clearly examined. This meant excluding others. Women graduating before or after those dates were not included.⁹ Nearly half of the ordained Covenant women have graduated from schools other than North Park and are voiceless in this study.¹⁰ Women who graduated with degrees other than Master of Divinity are excluded. The research did not purpose to make comparison or contrast to women Master of Divinity graduates in other denominational seminaries or even to the men graduates at North Park—although such studies would be enlightening. Neither did it solicit the insight of those Covenant women who transferred out of North Park to other seminaries. All answers are dated May 15, 1988. The study is not to make predictions but to give a snapshot, a full panorama, at this given moment twelve years after the vote. It is meant to illumine our present situation with this collection of personal histories and observances as the central resource.

The questionnaire elicited twenty-four returns with one unreturned. (The task of obtaining contemporary addresses proved the first hurdle.) Only two of the respondents entered seminary with membership in other denominations (United Methodist and Latvian Lutheran) and graduated to serve in them. Seven respondents who entered seminary as Covenant members have changed or are changing their denominational affiliation. Thirteen are ordained, eight of them in the Covenant. Twelve women are pastors, seven of those in this denomination. Three of the four hospital chaplains are Covenant; both military chaplains are. There is one short-term missionary and one “home turf” missionary (a homemaker with young children). Fourteen put their names in for Covenant placement while nine did not. One had a call prior to the placement process. They were all asked to “mark an X where you perceive the Covenant denomination’s relationship to women in ministry to be.”

Chart #1 entire sample



* *“It’s positive only to the extent that it has been experienced. Once a woman is placed, she is accepted. Aside from this, I think the attitude remains, ‘It’s okay for someone else’s church but not for mine.’”*

** *“Go to another denomination.”*

Comparison by Half Decades

A comparison between the chronological first half of the time span (1977–1982) and the second half (1983–1987) seemed natural when both groups totaled twelve. Both groups also had two hospital chaplains and a military chaplain. Beyond that, there were sharp contrasts. The most visible indication of the differences in the two groups came in plotting the responses to the former exercise by seniority group. The respondents of the first half of the decade indicated a significantly wider view of the denomination’s acceptance of ordained women than did those of the latter half of the decade. The earlier twelve found five respondents in the most pessimistic quadrant, four cautiously so, two cautiously optimistic, and one clearly so (given her qualifying statements quoted from Chart #1). The chart of the latter half of the decade brought a sharp contrast to the first half, with none of the women optimistic at any point about the denomination’s relationship to women ministers. All marks were on the pessimistic half of the spectrum; seven of them cautiously pessimistic and five of them in the most negative quadrant.

Chart #2 1977-1982 graduates



Chart #3 1983-1987 graduates



The picture is supported by data. In the first group, six women are presently in Covenant pastorates. Two others began seminary as Covenant members but transferred to other denominations (Evangelical Lutheran and United Presbyterian), both citing a threefold reason for leaving: theological differences, inability to find placement in a church, and more support for women in ministry in another church. Only one of the twelve did not put her name into the placement process; she remains in secular work and holds Covenant church membership at this time.

The numbers change significantly for the second half of the long decade. Instead of six being placed as Covenant pastors, there is one. There are double the number who left the Covenant to minister in other denominations (United Church of Christ, Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, and an independent church). Instead of one withdrawing from the placement process, there are six, three of them presently in membership in the Covenant. All the women who left or are leaving the church cited both the inability to find placement in a church and more support for women in ministry elsewhere as reasons for their departure. They are less likely than their earlier colleagues to see theological differences with the denomination as a reason (it was marked by two of the seven leaving the denomination).¹¹

Those Who Left

Several trends and components emerge as the responses of those graduates who left the Covenant are analyzed. Inability to find placement and lack of support for women in ministry is stated by all six pastors who left the Covenant to be placed in other denominations. Their leavetaking makes Glenn Anderson, former dean of North Park Theological Seminary and church historian, an accurate prophet: "Ordaining women pastors will never be a problem for the Covenant. It is placing them in churches that will be!"¹² That their number has doubled these last five years measures the amount of ground being lost in the placement issue. That the number of Covenant women who have left the denomination for other churches has tripled in those years is also distressing. That they did so after the intimate long-term investment of a four-year seminary relationship measures their sacrifice in leaving. One woman presented her rationale for leaving.

The Covenant does not want to appear completely backward culturally so the issue is talked up at denominational meetings.

However, when it comes to taking action to support women in ministry, the determination is just not there to follow through.

I really don't think the Covenant is willing to take the risk of throwing everything it can behind women in ministry. The bulk of its membership does not consider it an issue worth acting on. In fact, there is substantial split in regard to the issue of the ordination of women in the first place. As a result, nothing substantial is ever done toward addressing the issue.

Bottom line, I believe the issue of women in ministry is a theological issue related to the Covenant's understanding of the doctrines of the image of God, of mission, of humanity/sexuality, of revelation, to mention a few. The bulk of the Covenant's membership is theologically conservative and supports the traditional notion of the image of God as male and of minister as male.

The resistance to women in ministry is rooted in theology. This theology must change in order for women to be accepted as ministers. The stance of the Covenant toward this kind of change is basically closed. The Covenant does not want to risk offending its membership by standing with women in ministry in anything but a token few. The Covenant really does not want to be bothered.

One pastor in another denomination wrote of the separation and severance from her childhood Covenant church roots. "I feel my denominational move was like a divorce, but I trust God's provision." Wounds of sacrifice were related. "I graduated in 1985 and by 1986 when all the men in my class had been placed, I got one interview at a church which was isolated and obviously a bad place for a single woman from the inner city. I got no more interviews though I waited still another year." In other words, "It was less traumatic than to stay." Severance pains in leaving itself are repeated by many voices.

When my strength and passion for ministry and the church returns, it will be interesting to see where my heart is concerning the Covenant. Right now my anger and hurt at our frequent blindness and impotence to heal the broken-hearted

and bind up their wounds is too strong to predict any involvement in the Covenant in the future.

A woman presently leaving the denomination tells her story with clear analysis:

As a woman in ministry with the Covenant, I was regarded by the denominational executives as either invisible or as a thorn in the flesh. The token speeches or gestures made toward supporting women in ministry were too few and too thin. The Covenant places the issue of women in ministry at the bottom of their agenda...communicates this lack of support not so much by what is said as by what is not done. Women face the terrors of placement largely alone, and that is a devastating prospect.

I am sad to have to go elsewhere to find that support, but I won't be a martyr for the Covenant. I have too much to offer....The vision of the Covenant does not include me.

One respondent wrote in rambling eloquence of a sorority of exiles.

My close friends are the women with whom I share the horrible experience of completing NPTS and then waiting and wondering if we'd get jobs; then gambling our very lives and futures on it; then slowly realizing that God doesn't make justice happen—God asks people to do it. When I could stand the pain no longer—that of being ostracized from the very community I loved and wanted to be within, I moved on to easily find a call elsewhere, without a hint of prejudice; so I have left the Covenant along with too many others.

The joy of newly found support came from one in another church: "I feel grateful and lucky to have such freedom and strong affirmation and a strong sisterhood in my new denomination. I covet that for you." Looking back over her loss, another writes of the sovereignty of God in her life. "When it appears that one door closes, God opens another. Always look for the crack in the door. In spite of the difficulties I have had with the Covenant and the hurt they have caused me, God has truly blessed and enriched my life through my current ministry."

Several pastors in the chronological first half of the survey indicated their perception of this exodus movement. One with seniority wrote the

following: “I sense a maturing in the group that was ordained in the first five to six years. But I am concerned that we have become too comfortable—I am not invested in any of the women seminarians and know few of the recent graduates.” Some responses indicated more awareness of the newer women, especially one who said, “I worry about the women who are just entering pastoral ministry.” One gave a concerned analysis:

A year and a half ago, a denominational leader told me there were half a dozen women graduating from seminary who were “strong, well-rounded, gifted people. This year should be the telling point for us. If we can’t place this group, we’re in trouble.” I guess we’re in trouble. Not one 1987 woman graduate has a place in a Covenant pastorate at this time. The one woman who graduated in 1988 is yet to be placed.

Another wrote, “When I began ministry eight years ago, I did so with full hope that there would be others, women as ‘settlers’ who would follow, surpass, better us ‘pioneers.’ Now I find that hope not just frustrated but pretty much shattered.” And one “oldtimer” who ministers in another denomination said, “I have seen the effect the lack of support for women clergy in the placement process and the lack of pro-active education of local congregations who ‘won’t consider a woman’ has had on the spirit and ministry of some very competent Covenant women.”

Chart #4 *Covenanters who left the denomination following seminary*



Chart #5 *Covenanters who remained in the denomination*



Those Who Remained

Those ministers who remained in the Covenant had a predictably wider spread of markings on the positive to negative spectrum. There were three who were optimistic—they being from the first half of the decade. The other nine were in the pessimistic half, indicating a shared realism with their exiled colleagues. Questions twelve and thirteen of the questionnaire fill out their descriptions of their experience in the Covenant pastorate.

When asked how placement has been easy, several items brought multiple responses. All four hospital chaplains spoke of their gender being an asset to their hiring. They said that as chaplains being a “minority status is a plus rather than the minus it can be in the pastorate.” Several Covenant pastors on multiple staffs also felt it was an asset in their hiring. One associate pastor wrote, “The church I am to serve was highly encouraged to call a woman; I believe it was one of their priorities. I believe my call is in part because of my gender.” “As part of a clergy couple,” one wrote, “I am part of a mixed team and, with my husband, we provide multiple talents.” The inclusion of a woman in such multiple staff positions goes beyond tokenism to strengthen the broader full ministry in the church.

Others spoke of the assets and liabilities of being highly visible. “I have visibility—I rarely have to introduce myself to any administrator.” “...visibility was part of the call in ways men rarely know so young—a blessing and a burden. Many ‘token’ assignments for a woman pastor came my way, assignments that demanded excellence.”

The crucible of that premature visibility brought out strength. “Because I have been on trial since deciding to be a pastor, I believe I am more focused and tested than my male counterparts. I cannot be passive in the process. Being active in it keeps me on my toes.” “The visibility gave me many speaking engagements outside the local church; I could do a full-time job speaking at Covenant Women events, seminars of all types, camps, etc., even though I could not get a call as a pastor. My speaking skills blossomed.” Being under that public microscope has a “Catch-22” in it.

As women in the Covenant we have no leeway to be sloppy or passive or unprepared or conflicted basket cases in great need of pampering. It is terribly sad that this whole crass process leaves us hurting and bleeding so often. And then we have to be so careful where we voice our hurt or we ruin our fragile reputation.

Continued stress was predicted. “The difficulty continues—women here still have to ‘prove’ themselves and probably always will.”

Early-testing of the women expanded freedom in ministry for some. “I sense a welcome maturing in myself. In my present ministry I am given a wide-ranging freedom to minister as myself. That also is a trade-off in little accountability or support.” There were echoes of that freedom. “The congregation’s expectations of me as a pastor have not been as rigid as I believe they would have been for a male [fresh out of seminary]. I have been freer to work to establish my own role as a pastor than male colleagues have been.”

Several respondents wrote of their acceptance process in the local congregation and how its affirmation touched them. “I did have a positive experience as an intern pastor and was given a wide variety of opportunities to minister. I pray for more experiences like this in both an intern and non-intern pastoral position for women.” Many in parish ministry stated joy in the acceptance they had found in “their” congregations, reaffirming that, “Once a woman is placed, she is accepted.” Another dreamed, “I would give each Covenanter an opportunity to hear a woman preach and to be cared for by a Covenant woman pastor. The experience would break down much of their resistance to woman clergy.”

Such strengths are held in tension with hopes these pastors have for the Covenant’s acceptance of women in ministry. Their responses reveal they are not starry-eyed, blind loyalists but pragmatic workers. They have made a realistic evaluation of the cost of their investment in a vision for the Covenant and still chose to enter their calling in the denomination. When asked how placement has been difficult, battle scars are revealed.

Placement has been an exercise of approach-avoidance. Both times I have sought placement have included the same nervousness that all pastors know. But I know that by being a woman my name can be capriciously torpedoed at any stage in placement process. The hardest time I had was a three-year period in which my name was entered in nineteen different search committees. Only one of those churches told me I did not have the gifts they needed; in only one did I discontinue conversation in that I recognized no challenge for myself. The rest dismissed me for various shaded reasonings about my womanhood. The worst question I received in an interview for placement: “What are your plans regarding any children?”

Another spoke of the razor's edge in personal interviews for placement.

There were churches that superintendents would not consider me for because of my gender. In all the interviews/contacts with churches, I at some point was asked to engage how my gender played out in ministry, and in some cases, "prove" I was not too feminist. I doubt very much that most male pastors are asked "How does your being a male effect your ministry? Does your 'masculinity' come out in worship (i.e., language, hymns, images of God):"

Most personal stories intertwine with theological hope and political insight.

I think women in ministry are perceived and treated as a big sore spot. It has been more hassle than the denomination bargained for or ever wanted. If they could change their vote without theological trouble, I think they would in a minute. Conversely, I believe women in ministry give cultural/theological/sexual integrity to the denomination and enhance its ministry.

Additional responses spoke of that larger vision. "The ministry of ordained women is vital not only within some local congregations but as a gift to the larger church."

One woman from the last half of the decade presently in the placement process struggles with that vision amidst the denomination's reluctance to accept it.

It's discouraging to me that people won't allow for the Holy Spirit to move in women as he does in men. For any of us in ministry, mainly pastoral roles (or trying to get there), it would be disobedience to God's will to not go and serve in that capacity as he leads us. How can people say a woman should not serve in a pastoral position or any ministry position when the Spirit calls her to do so? That is not allowing God to be God, but hampering his intent. God's Spirit moves in both men and women to do what he calls them to do. To say women should not serve in a pastoral role or any role in ministry is to take God's role from him in a sense, to stifle his intent.

Another graduate from that class wrote:

We should want every Christian to grow to all they were created to be. We would want all the giftedness and anointing of God to be poured out on all people, female and male, young and old, black and white, etc.... I personally think it is silly, sad, and immature of us to hold half the church back from their identities and callings because they are female. (Actually, I didn't say it strong enough—I think it is a travesty.)

Her struggle with reality in light of her calling is expanded by her peers. “We in the Covenant have become ‘culturally’ conservative and our corporate culture is fairly passive/aggressive. A lot of resistance to women is covert but it’s also something which allows people to feel good because they are identifying with a conservative stance without doing important theological work.” Another observed, “I label the Covenant’s relationship to women in ministry as ‘benign neglect.’ I get the feeling the Covenant deals with the issue because it ‘has to,’ with reluctance and resentment.”

There are indications that those requesting a second call out of seminary will find the process unchanged or even more difficult than the first. “Second parish placement was harder than the first!” writes one pastor. Another braced herself for an attempt at a second placement.

I’m faced with the possibility of maybe needing to move in the next six months. But I don’t see it being any easier today than it was in 1982 when I graduated....I’m faced with the double crunch of not only having too many people for too few places, but also having even fewer places even considering the resume of a woman. We can’t get jobs “through the system” but rather through our happening to be in the right place at the right time.

Yet another dared to venture insight beyond the second parish call.

As I anticipate another placement, all I see is a glass ceiling. I thought the church would progress and accept us. Now that clear struggle to the sky is obstructed by a ceiling clamped on by Christian sexism. What progressive possibilities for increased responsibility are there for a woman’s successive calls? Not many in the Covenant.

The Forgotten 1976 Second and Third Votes

Throughout the questionnaire, the Master of Divinity graduates noted discrepancies and dichotomies between various representative groupings in the denomination. The inconsistency of theological or political muscle was described between words and action, strategy and follow through, leadership and laity, promises and empowerment, seminary teachers and denominational leadership, theology and politics. “Vocal expressions of support are meaningless unless backed by strategy and activity.” It is a common view, repeated often. “It’s time to put flesh to spoken promises.” Again, “In word and education we encourage women, yet there seems to be more of a skepticism and caution than a heartfelt supporting of their call and giftedness.”

In looking back, the denomination’s mixed messages regarding commitment to the issue which these women recognize come honestly. Immediately after the 1976 vote to ordain women, significant second and third motions came to the floor. They are recorded in the yearbook.

It was moved that the Board of the Ministry in consultation with leaders of Covenant Women and the Covenant Executive Board institute a denominationally-wide program of information, education, and placement in the matter of employment of qualified ordained women in local parishes.

The motion lost and was immediately followed by a lunch-hour break. Afterward, the delegates moved, seconded, and voted that the

Board of the Ministry study anew the issue of ordination and seek to air this issue throughout the Covenant constituency by appropriate means; and, further, that the Board of the Ministry present a progress report to the 1977 Annual Meeting for consideration by that body.¹³

The denial of the first motion severely restricted the resourcing of the church to understand the new status of ministering women. The progress report and clarification of that status, which was proposed and demanded in the last motion, was never presented at the 1977 meeting.¹⁴

Amazingly, these forgotten second and third motions have never been brought again to the business agenda of an Annual Meeting. Yet they are two important decisions about educating and providing resources on the subject, answered in the negative, that continue to have power and influence as the denomination proceeds in its history with ordained

women. If the motions had come earlier than Friday afternoon, without the “exhaustion” factor, answered in the affirmative, then today’s picture of the Covenant’s dealing with women’s ordination would look quite different. Instead, the adopted policy of *laissez-faire* has been the backbone of this first formative decade.

Suggested Resources

“If you had a magic wand, what would you do with it to aid the progress of women in ministry in the Covenant?” asked the survey’s sixteenth question. The multitude, consistency, and substance of the responses fill the vacuum that the negative votes of the “forgotten motions” have given as an inheritance.

Responses to the question fell into several groupings. All major roles and positions were touched by the suggestions of readjustment. The denomination’s legal polity itself was the first to be corrected. “Within my new denomination I found a constitution which prohibits discrimination,” wrote one pastor. Such legal revision would “require churches to be equal-opportunity employers” wrote another. Illustrations of the reorganization were continued by others. “Aided churches should be required to interview women candidates.” Several knew it would change the conference superintendent’s freedom to be reluctant to place women. “Fire all conference superintendents who have not placed a woman in the pastorate.” The ministerium and ordination process would be altered with the legal ramifications. “Require every Covenant minister ordained after 1976 to ascribe to the denomination’s position in the call of women to ministry. We have a set of standards on the issue of baptism. So also should we for women in ministry.”

The majority of the question’s responses considered heartfelt changes in people throughout the denomination. Improvements of understanding and support were sought by those in every category in the church. A different approach was sought from leadership. “The leaders of the denomination have to actively lead on issues of accepting women in ministry—and not just wait to see if and when and where acceptance may come.” The suggestion to “have the top offices in the denomination more than just verbally supportive of women in ministry” was given as a strategy. “There needs to be a diligent, aggressive ministry from the top.”

Emphasis was given to it with the prediction: “Until both the seminary and Covenant administration actively seek placement of women, little progress will be made.” One now in another denomination provided an

example. “Our executive made it part of his personal and professional agenda to place women in positions of pastoral leadership as well as denominational leadership.”

Revisions in support extended beyond leadership of the denomination and education administration to include the job of conference superintendents. Again, another now in a different denomination gave an illustration.

The bishop of this church has a high commitment to placing women. One key strategy is not to place women in competition with men for a call. He will argue/persuade when needed. My new denomination is not a panacea, I should add, but the active and clever, careful leadership of bishops is key.

Her illustration is the hope of many and for some a source of frustrating comparison. “Make all the conference superintendents prowomen in ministry,” was repeated with “Superintendents should be positive advocates for women in ministry.” One not only suggested removing those who have not yet placed a woman in their conferences but wanted to “replace them with those who will.”

Those in the seminary leadership also were offered reforms. Many suggested the hiring of more women faculty. The philosophy of curriculum was urged to expand beyond one “women in ministry” class and be integrated in all classes including biblical studies, pastoral care, church history, etc.... Two wanted more resource books of inclusive language, women’s history, and theology available for men and women students as well as returning clergy. Others insisted the seminary should be much more aggressive in recruiting more women students. The resulting gender balance would improve classroom attitude and focus, making it a more healthy environment for both men and women.

Clergy and laity were often named as co-recipients of an awareness and acceptance program. Pivotal in the responses was the word “educate,” repeated eleven times in the answers, often with exclamation points or capital letters. The suggestions hauntingly sound like the “forgotten motions” of 1976.

The educational program would be centered in the denominational leadership. “Money from the denomination should be channeled to educate on this issue to change the prejudice which exists.” “Put money in the denominational budget to resource, to teach, and encourage....” The target of this financed program was shared. “As far as lay people are

concerned, they are for the most part hesitant about women in a pastoral role. . . . We also have pastors who do not support women in pastoral roles,” was a common observation.

The program would both teach and raise awareness of women in ministry so that acceptance would be widespread. Part of the teaching would be head knowledge, expanded by the experiences of other denominations. “Get in touch with resources. . . retain consultants from other denominations who have struggled to promote women in ministry to advise in ways to open the way for women.” “Get people, the heads of all various departments to support it,” urged one woman. Then “materials should be published for ministers and lay people.” Denominational leaders would initiate the emphasis perhaps even expanding the Department of the Ministry staff with a “female person to work as advocate and supporter of women pastors.” Together these leaders would work, “addressing the issue and informing pastors and their congregations by visitation (not mail—which often doesn’t get read or passed on to the congregations) of the scriptural position and affirmation.”

The academic education would be implemented with a concerted effort of exposure of the giftedness of women ministers. The plea to “have ministers and laity in the church experience women in the pulpit rather than talk about it” was given specific procedures. “Ensure that every Covenant church at least once a year has a woman as supply preacher.” Such supply would be provided by “a traveling woman evangelist or speaker’s bureau featuring our most competent women preachers.” Parish ministry would not be the only arena changed. A desire was stated for “more inclusion of women leading worship at regional and denominational gatherings.” One would want “to ensure that half of the scheduled guest worship leaders/preachers for chapels, conferences, Midwinter, etc., would be female.” “It saddens me to see no woman on the platform during Annual Meetings and Midwinter except Evelyn Johnson,” reflected another.

Summary

The authentic voices of these twenty-four women reflect the personal and corporate struggle of the last twelve years. Those who found ministry placements in a variety of specialties (parish pastor, military or hospital chaplain, short-term missionary) experienced the joy of fulfilling their calling. Their personal biographies and insight shed light on denominational history from 1977 to 1987.

Major trends are revealed by this study. Under one-third of the graduates pastor in Covenant churches. Those lucky enough to graduate in the first half of the decade were six times more likely to be placed in a Covenant church than their colleagues. Over one-third of the graduates, Covenant members upon matriculation, decided to leave the denomination sometime following graduation; one-half of the graduates of the latter five years are in their number. The consistent reasons given for leaving were lack of support for women in ministry and an inability to find placement. Those in the latter half of the decade indicated more universal pessimism about the denomination's relationship to women in ministry.

Those who left the Covenant offered analysis and theology and, as highest treasure, their journeys of personal investment and sacrifice with their calling. Those who stayed in the denomination did so with eyes wide open, fully seeing the realistic obstacles blocking their vision for the acceptance of ordained women. They continue to invest in that vision, realizing second and third placements are getting more difficult than their first ones were years ago.

Suggestions were made for improvement and change as history continues to be written. Denominational and seminary leadership was urged to become more personally and professionally involved in the issue. Most hoped the role of conference superintendent would be stronger in the area of placement. A comprehensive educational program was encouraged for both clergy and laity, although most of the women knew it would not have deep impact unless the teaching coincided with exposure to a woman actually doing ministry. An extensive schedule for using women role models in a variety of ministry settings was urged.

These women's voices recover not just one, but all three of the 1976 votes regarding the future of women in ordained ministry. Those votes are recorded not just in the denomination's history but in their personal biographies. Together the three motions—the quick vote, the lack of investing denominational resources, the avoidance of full discussion—seem an accurate paradigm of the denomination's treatment of ordained women since those historic votes. Spoken and unspoken tensions and hopes have lived side by side as history has been written. Given the revelations of this study, what will the picture be in another decade?

Endnotes

- 1 Clifford Johnson, present president of the Covenant Ministerium.
- 2 *Covenant Yearbook 1976* (ECCA, 1976), 171–177.
- 3 “Statement on the Ordination of Women” (Board of the Ministry, 1976).

Can women serve in the ordained ministry of the Covenant Church?
Can the Church rightfully administer the rite of ordination to women who have been called to the ministry of the Gospel and who meet the qualifications for ordination as set forth in the Rules of the Board of the Ministry?

This statement is presented for study and discussion, with the hope that the Church might arrive at a decision on this crucial matter.

I. WHAT IS ORDINATION IN THE COVENANT?

Ordination has been defined as “the formal bestowal of ministerial office, supplementing the inward call of the Spirit with the authority of the church publicly given by its agents competent to ordain.” Historically, there have not been many official pronouncements on the meaning of ordination in the Covenant Church. The records that we have deal largely with rules and regulations for ordination.

In 1973 the Covenant approved, at its Annual Meeting, a complete revision of the “Rules of the Board of the Ministry.” One significant change in those rules was the attempt to remove any reference to gender, thus making it possible for the church to consider the ordination of women into the ministry of the Covenant Church.

The rules, in Article II, Section 1, define ordination in this way: “Ordination in the Covenant is an act of the church by which a servant of God is formally set apart for ministry. The church ordains only after determining through careful examination that the candidate has been called of God, is genuinely committed to the apostolic message, and lives in conformity to it. In ordination the church gratefully accepts the ordinand as one called by God and given to the church to minister in the Spirit of Christ.”

Nowhere in that definition of ordination, nor in the “Qualifications for Ordination,” is there any indication that women, who have been “called of God” and are “genuinely committed to the apostolic message and live in conformity to it,” can be denied the rite of ordination if that is their desire.

By its very rules, the Covenant Church can rightfully administer the rite of ordination to women.

II. WHERE IS IT WRITTEN?

Historically, it is true that whenever our fathers were confronted with an issue of theology or church polity one of the first questions to be asked was the question, "Where is it written?" From its beginnings the Covenant Church has regarded "the Holy Scriptures, the Old and the New Testament, as the Word of God and the only perfect rule for faith, doctrine, and conduct." Therefore, it is imperative that we raise that question again in dealing with the issue at hand.

Certain passages have been cited through the years for the subordination of women and against their ordination. These passages are of such importance that we must examine them in some detail.

1 Corinthians 11:3-16. It appears that the issue at hand in this passage is not so much the prohibition of women from places of leadership in the church as it is the matter of their covering their heads. The context of the passage indicates that Paul is here defending the decorum of the day in the light of the culture of that society. Women were to be veiled in public places. That, however, did not exclude women from praying and prophesying in the church. That they were already doing in Corinth (v. 5), and Paul gives no indication here that they should cease and desist, only that their heads be covered.

In the same passage (vv. 11-12) Paul goes a step further, indicating that in Christ men and women were interdependent (i.e., "Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man, nor man of woman; for as woman was made from man, so man is now born of woman.") Therefore, women may continue to pray and prophesy.

1 Corinthians 14:33-36. This passage, if taken seriously, immediately raises a contradiction that must be resolved. How can it be that Paul allowed the Corinthian women both to pray and prophesy in chapter eleven, while in this passage he forbids them to speak in the church? Was it that Paul was giving permission to prophesy in chapter eleven, but stating his own preference against it here in chapter fourteen? Or was it that his term for women here in this text likely meant "wives" rather than "all women"? Or perhaps Paul was simply irked with wives who had interrupted the worship services.

Whatever the explanation for the apparent contradiction, the problem here makes this passage questionable grounds for the prohibition of ordination for women.

1 Timothy 2:8-15. There are few passages in the Scriptures which

have aroused more heated discussion than this one. Taken literally as authoritative commands these verses would exclude women completely from all leadership in the church. It is obvious that such an interpretation was not actually practiced in the New Testament churches. Paul's letters contain the names of many women who were prominent in the work of the New Testament Church: Lydia, Dorcas, Priscilla, Euodia, Syntyche, Phoebe, Mary, Rhoda, the mother of Rufus, the sister of Nereus, and others.

Again it appears that Paul is here reflecting the custom and culture of his day, in the light of which Christian women would have been subject to criticism had they been conspicuous in public. Therefore, these texts do not justify anyone in claiming that Paul explicitly and deliberately extends the binding force of his rules to all churches till the end of time. Paul refers us to the authoritative account of God's creation of marriage as the basis for his rule concerning the behavior of women in the churches, but he also requires us to think for ourselves and to consult our own Spirit-guided biblically-corrected social sense of what is upright and virtuous and then to mold and maintain customs and practices in the Church of Christ which will preserve it in holiness.

But Paul raises another issue in this passage when he bases his argument here for the subordination of women on the "orders of creation." This points us to another argument against the ordination of women, an argument that states that woman's subordination to man is written into the very structure of the universe. As Paul writes here, "For Adam was formed first, then Eve."

The pertinent question here is whether the "order of creation" is understood in a static sense, as if for all time God had determined a set pattern. Or whether God's ordering activity is a dynamic reality. Did God ordain an eternal, unchanging subordination of woman to man, or, instead, is he actually changing the "orders of creation" by his constant activity in history?

Then too a closer look seems to reveal that the subordination of woman was not an order of creation after all, but an order of judgment. It was only after the Fall that God said to Eve, "Your husband ... shall rule over you" (Genesis 3:16).

But the decisive question is this: Were the orders of creation all upstaged by the order of redemption? Did the coming of Jesus Christ change the relationship between man and woman?

Man and woman were created free and equal within a harmonious world (Genesis 1:27-31). However, after the Fall man was subject

to struggling with nature, and woman to the pain of childbirth and man's rule.

But in the New Covenant not only is the original order restored but it is also transformed by being "in Christ." Women are no longer subordinate to men, but men and women are "subject to one another" in the Lord (Ephesians 5:21). They are interdependent in Christ (1 Corinthians 11:11-12), joint heirs in Christ (1 Peter 3:7), and equal in Christ (Galatians 3:28).

In Galatians 3:28, Paul affirms that "there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus." The weight of Paul's words affirms that to be in Christ is to be in a present kingdom where there is no distinction between persons. Greeks and Jews are accepted on equal footing. Slaves and free men become brothers, men and women minister side by side in spreading the gospel. There are no second-class citizens in Christ's Church.

It is also significant that wherever Paul speaks of the gifts of the Holy Spirit he does so without any reference at all to gender. The gifts of the Spirit are distributed among the whole body and are to be used to build up the body of Christ. There is, again, no indication that women in the body are excluded from the gifts of apostleship, of the prophet, evangelist, pastor, and teacher. Those gifts are available to women in the same manner as they are available to men!

It is well to consider, also, the record of the New Testament. A woman was the first to see the resurrected Lord, women were the first to be told of the Lord's resurrection, and they were the first to be commanded to tell others of the Lord's resurrection (John 20:16; Mark 16:17; Matthew 28:7; Luke 24:22-23). Women played a major role in the history of salvation. Women proclaimed the gospel as prophetesses (Luke 2:38; Acts 2:17; 1 Corinthians 11:5), they served as deaconesses (Romans 16:1; 1 Timothy 3:11), and Priscilla and Aquila, Paul's "fellow workers in Christ Jesus" (Romans 16:3) "expounded the way of God more accurately" to Apollos (Acts 18:26).

And finally, there is the place given to women in the life and ministry of Jesus. There is little doubt that during his entire life Jesus dumbfounded his critics by the place that he gave to women in his ministry. There was Mary Magdalene, and the other women who came to the empty tomb on resurrection day. There was the woman of Samaria beside the well. Jesus broke all tradition not only by speaking to a Samaritan, but by speaking to a woman in public. From the evidence

in the Gospel account Jesus elevated the status of women in his day, and was glad to number them among his closest group of followers.

Though one can find good evidence to support both the subordination of women as well as clear evidence to support their right to ordination, the overriding principles of New Testament Faith clearly make it possible for the Church to consider the ordination of women into the ministry of the Covenant Church!

III. WHAT HAVE WE DONE?

Covenant tradition and practice regarding the role of women in the ministry of our churches is living evidence that we have not followed a more restrictive interpretation of those Scriptures often used to preclude the ordination of women. In our churches women are already ministering in ways that include almost every function of ordained ministry. Women teach, counsel, organize, administer, direct our choirs, and play our musical instruments. They also evangelize, lead in Bible studies, write books, and encourage, inspire, and build up the body of faith. They lead worship services, give meditations, pray, read the Scriptures, serve the Lord's Supper, and witness to a living faith. Women serve in every elective office in our churches, from chairperson to the board of trustees. They are vital to every stewardship effort and are active participants in the church's ministry of visitation. For decades our women missionaries have performed many of the functions of our ordained clergy. They have preached, taught, administered, and shared in the life of the church.

We already have women who hold ministerial license, which grants them the right to preach the Word and administer the sacraments. To give them ordination is to recognize fully their ministry.

Because women have played such an important and vital role in the ministry of the Covenant Church throughout its history, it seems appropriate that we now allow those who desire it the rite of ordination as the culminating act in the individual and public stewardship of God's grace in their lives! This is the very intent of our Lord who ministered to and received all on equal ground. Since Jesus treated men and women as "full persons" equally so should the Church by ordaining both!

Our historical practice calls forcefully for granting to women the rite of ordination.

IN CONCLUSION

It must be said that for the Covenant to ordain women will be one

thing, but how the Covenant Church will utilize these ordained persons will be another. The study of the experience of other denominations tells us that its acceptance is a slow process. There are 80 of 262 denominations in the United States who ordain women, and some of them have done so for years. However, not more than 5 percent of the ministers in those churches are women, even though over half of their members are!

The acceptance of ordained women clergy in our Covenant churches will require specific educational efforts to achieve more general understanding and concern. Attitudes are best changed by experience, and when women have an opportunity to become pastors, then ordained women will find increasing acceptance.

The practical problems are real but not overwhelming. A woman who desires to be a pastor must seriously consider what effect her vocation will have on her marriage. A woman pastor may have responsibilities to her home, husband, and children, and this may make her style of ministry different from that of a man. Even as a man may not be completely effective because he is a man, so a woman may be limited by her womanhood. We could say that there are as many practical problems for the man in ministry as there are for the woman.

Because the basic concern of the ministry is the proclamation of the gospel, and in the light of the biblical, historical, and theological study which is presented in this paper, the Board of the Ministry is convinced that the time has come for the Covenant Church to give serious consideration to the ordination of women.

Therefore, the Board of the Ministry recommends to the Ninety-first Covenant Annual Meeting that the church go on record as favoring the ordination of women.

4 Evangelical Covenant Church of America, *Covenant Yearbook 1981* (ECCA, 1981), 240.

5 Klyne Snodgrass, Ph.D., "A Biblical and Theological Basis for Women in Ministry," Chicago, 1982. Available through the Department of Publications.

6 Ordained Covenant women

1978 Hughes-Tremper, Sherron
Shimmin, Carol J. (Nordstrom)

1979 Cole, Adele

1980 Lang, Carla

1981 Sandin, Marilyn

- Miller-Vikander, Mary
Lundblad, Janet
- 1982 Anderson, Isolde
Lambert, Jean
- 1983 Palmatier, Karen
Potts, Jan
Bouts, Cathy
Wiebe, Marie
Dickson, Pat
- 1985 Anderson, Frances
Casey, Helen
Floto, Lynne
- 1986 Decker, Prances D.
- 1987 Benson, Joanne
Roth, Carol
Werner, Ruthanne Lovain
- 1988 Krekelberg, Anne
Morrison, Laurel B.

7 *Covenant Quarterly* Survey

1. What year did you graduate from North Park Theological Seminary? With which degree?
2. What was your church membership upon entrance to North Park?
3. What is your present church membership?
4. Are you ordained?
5. As of May 15, 1988, are you presently serving a Covenant church? If yes, in what job title? Part-time or full?
6. Is this a church in which you were a layperson before gaining your theological degree?
7. Are you presently serving a church of another denomination? If yes, name of denomination, job title, part-time or full.
8. If not serving a church in a pastoral role, please indicate what work you are doing at the present time.
9. When you graduated from North Park, did you place your name in process for a pastoral call in the denomination? If no, indicate the reasons: decision to enter specialized ministry, change in job interests, anticipated difficulty in the Covenant's placement process, theological differences with denomination, other.
10. Please list the contacts you had from Covenant churches in the first year after graduation during the placement process. Phone

calls from conference superintendent, phone calls from church members, phone calls from search committee, meeting with church search committee, meeting with congregation, senior pastor of church needing multiple staff, phone call from pastor near the open church who called to inform you of opening.

11. If you were a member of the Covenant denomination upon entering North Park but are not a member now, please check the reason(s) for your change: theological differences, inability to find placement in a church, change in career goals, more support for women in ministry, comments.
 12. If appropriate, tell how placement as a woman has been easy for you.
 13. If appropriate, tell how placement as a woman has been difficult for you.
 14. Mark an X where you perceive the Covenant denomination's relationship to women in ministry to be.
positive <]-----[> negative
Explain.
 15. If you had a magic wand, what would you do with it to aid the progress of women in ministry in the Covenant?
 16. Comments of encouragement and/or discouragement. Date, name, (optional).
- 8 North Park Theological Seminary, Women M.Div. graduates (1977-1987)
- | | |
|------|--|
| 1977 | Sherron Hughes-Tremper |
| 1979 | Sharon Engebretson |
| 1980 | Janet R. Lundblad
Mary Miller-Vikander (Mary C. Miller)
Rumona Mord (Rumona Mord-Jacobus)
Marilyn Sandin (Marilyn Sandin Alexander) |
| 1981 | Janice Erickson-Pearson
Isolde K. Anderson
Marlys Rudeen |
| 1982 | Catherine Bouts
Karen Pearson (Karen Palmatier)
Jan Hallstrom-Potts (Jan Potts) |
| 1983 | Janet Pierson-Kyle |
| 1984 | Helen H. Cepero
Eileen Lundquist**
Dawn Swartz Ruthanne Werner |

- 1986 Aina Pulin
Stacey Wagner-Noble
- 1987 Catherine Campobello
Michele J. Guest
Debra Gustafson
Ann Marie Krekelberg
Cheryl Larsen
Deborah Power*
Melanie Tornquist

*questionnaire not returned

**no forwarding address available

9 Omitted was Carla Lang, a 1976 graduate presently serving as A.A.C.P. certified counselor in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, in process of transferring her ordination to the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America.

10 Women Master of Divinity graduates in the Covenant have attended Bethel, Fuller, Northwestern Lutheran, Union, and Yale Theological Seminaries.

11 Category	1977–1982	1982–1987
Covenant pastors	6	1
Covenant members who left for other denominations' pastorates	2	4
Pastor entering seminary from another denomination	0	1
Hospital chaplains	2	2
Military chaplain	1	1
Short-term missionary	0	1
Did not enter placement process	1	6
Those who entered seminary as Covenant members and are in transition to other churches	2	6

12 Mary Miller-Vikander, "A Beginning ... Together" in *Women as Pastors*, ed. Lyle E. Schaller, Creative Leadership Series (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1981), 76.

13 *Covenant Yearbook 1976*, 178-179.

14 *Covenant Yearbook 1977* (ECCA, 1977). The Board of Ministry recognized but did not answer the intent of the third 1976 motion when its 1977 written report stated: "The ordination of women was approved with the clarification that the meeting was not necessarily accepting all the rationale for the supporting statement," 95.

Two Decades Later: North Park Theological Seminary Female M.Div. Graduates (1977–1997)

*Isolde Anderson, pastor, Sauganash Community Church,
Chicago, Illinois*

This year, 1998, marks the twentieth anniversary of the ordination of women clergy in the Evangelical Covenant Church. From a handful of pioneers in the late 1970s, the number of female clergy has grown significantly. More women are attending seminary than ever before. Women are involved in a greater variety of ministries. Of those involved in pastoral ministry, several have received second and third calls to churches. What has been the experience of our denomination in training and placing women in Covenant ministry during this period? Where have we been successful, and where do we need to improve?

Ten years ago a survey was done of female master of divinity graduates of North Park Theological Seminary (NPTS) and the results were published in the *Covenant Quarterly*.¹ That study compared the ten-year history of women NPTS graduates with the Covenant's 1976 "Statement on the Ordination of Women." Among its key findings was that a significant number of female pastors had left the Covenant to find jobs in other denominations. Many females had experienced gender discrimination by conference superintendents and local churches in the placement process. On the other hand, women also experienced affirmation of their gender because of the greater visibility it gave them in the job search; it was frequently viewed as an asset in chaplaincy, and it helped them develop an inner strength and identity.

Several suggestions for improving understanding and support were offered in the summary of the study, including the need for (1) policy changes in the denomination to prohibit gender discrimination in clergy hiring practices, (2) clear denominational leadership on the issue of women in ministry, (3) development of an educational program for local churches on the issue, and (4) greater exposure of churches to women

clergy. The study concluded, “Spoken and unspoken tensions and hopes have lived side by side as history has been written. Given the revelations of this study, what will the picture be in another decade?”²

A New Questionnaire

That closing question now introduces the findings of a new study on the placement experiences of NPTS female M.Div. graduates since 1977.³ The new study used all of the questions contained in the 1988 survey, with a few modifications, including some wording changes and greater development of response categories. The new survey also added two new questions, which take into account the twenty-year potential work history of the respondents. These new questions inquire about the full spectrum of work women have done since graduating from seminary and, if they are in pastoral ministry, how their second or third job search compared to the first.

In the 1988 survey, North Park Theological Seminary graduates were selected for study because of the seminary’s focus on Covenant students and involvement in the denominational placement process. The 1998 survey likewise focuses on female M.Div. graduates, not only for the reasons given above, but also for purpose of comparison. The survey sample does not include orientation students, women who transferred from NPTS to other seminaries, women who graduated from NPTS with other degrees, women transferring their ordination standing to the Covenant from other denominations, or male students who graduated during this period. These groups would be profitable to include in a future study. This survey is, therefore, a qualitative, not quantitative, analysis of one segment of the potential clergy population of the Covenant.

The hardest task was to acquire from North Park University and the Department of Ministry an accurate and complete list of M.Div. graduates.⁴ In addition to the names and addresses supplied by these sources, I received further leads from other women clergy about seminary graduates whose names did not appear on any “official” list, generating a mailing list of sixty women.⁵ All were sent questionnaires. Follow-up postcards were sent to those who did not respond by the original due date. In total, thirty-eight women sent back surveys. One response was handwritten and did not use the form supplied.

Profile of Respondents

Of the thirty-eight responders, two were not M.Div. graduates of NPTS, but orientation students. Their comments (but not personal

data) are included in the interpretive section of this paper and so noted. Of the M.Div. graduates, four had specialities: two in urban ministry (Seminary Consortium for Urban Pastoral Education) and membership in Covenant churches before attending seminary, four were members of other denominations, one was not affiliated with any church, and one did not indicate her affiliation. Currently twenty-nine still hold membership in Covenant churches, four are with other denominations, and three are inactive or not members of any church. This contrasts with the 1988 study, in which seven respondents (out of twenty-four) had left or were in the process of leaving the Covenant. Thirty of the 1998 respondents are ordained (UCC, ELCA, Latvian ELCA, ECC); six are not.

Where Are They Now?

The most significant numerical shift occurs in employment history. Of the thirty-six M.Div. graduates, only thirteen are currently serving in Covenant churches. Of these, four are part-time employees. Twenty-three are not employed in Covenant churches. Of the twenty-three not serving Covenant churches,

- four are working as chaplains in Covenant institutions

- four are working as chaplains (military, institutional) outside the Covenant

- three pastor churches within other denominations or independent churches

- two hold administrative positions with other denominations

- two are career missionaries with the Covenant

- two are in social services

- one is no longer working

- one teaches at a Covenant institution

- one is a substitute teacher

- one is a retreat facilitator, writer, and artist

- one directs a food pantry

- one works in retail business

The data above show that only 25 percent of female NPTS M.Div. graduates are currently full-time Covenant pastors. Eleven percent are part-time Covenant pastors; 8 percent are pastors of non-Covenant churches; 22 percent serve as chaplains; 5.5 percent are denominational administrators; 5.5 percent are missionaries; 22 percent have found or created alternative jobs for themselves, many of which utilize their pastoral

gifts. Without having similar statistics for male graduates, it is impossible to make accurate comparisons of placement results. However, it is highly likely that more than 25 percent of male NPTS M.Div. graduates of the past twenty years are employed full-time as Covenant pastors. Again, this warrants further research. Further, it is important to note that at the time of graduation, twenty-two women (61 percent) placed their names in process for a pastoral call. Of the fourteen (39 percent) who did not place their names in process for a pastoral call, four were already planning to enter specialized ministry, three others had positions already offered to them before graduation, two were leaving the Covenant for another denomination, two were waiting for husbands to graduate from seminary, one was preparing to go to the mission field, and one was not sure about her job interests at that point.

Leaving the Covenant

Unlike the profile in 1988, only four of the women who responded to the 1998 survey have left the Covenant.⁶ One of them was already affiliated with another denomination before entering seminary. Another left for theological reasons. She explained, “Had it not been the case, I would’ve stayed and ‘gutted it out’ to deal with the practical problems.” Two others left because of inability to find placement in Covenant churches, as well as discovering more support for women in ministry elsewhere. Both are now solo pastors in non-Covenant churches. One wrote, “Getting a job was impossible. When you graduate, you have loans to pay off. I waited two years (nearly in poverty) to get a Covenant job before forging a path to the [new denomination].” The other wrote, “Whereas I am a proud and grateful graduate of NPC and NPTS, I sometimes feel like a casualty of the denomination. At seminary, I experienced a tremendous amount of support and nurture. However, I was bewildered in the placement process. The only interviews I had were for Christian education positions with pay horrifyingly low.... I found the ‘upper’ leadership of the denomination most resistant.... I left the Covenant because I felt little support for my call...with the exception of a very few friends, NPTS, and my internship church.”

Several others who responded to the survey are still affiliated with the Covenant but are contemplating leaving. One woman, not currently serving in a church, wrote, “If I ever leave the Covenant it will be first because of the fact that I average three years between churches and second because of a lack of support for women.” Another, serving in a church part-time, wrote, “It’s been three and a half years since graduation and I’m

still scrambling....I'm running out of places for several different reasons... moving out of the Covenant is looming larger." A third graduate, not employed in a church, wrote, "My disenchantment with the Covenant was finalized a few years ago after I'd asked them to please mail some information to the Presbyterian Board of Inquiry at a time when I was considering a denominational move. They complied and then proceeded to address me as 'Mrs. [John Doe]' or 'Mrs. [Jane Doe]'! Where the previous title of 'Reverend' went, or why, was an interesting point of development and simply added to all the other inappropriate decisions and neglects." Another, in the search process for the past year, writes, "I have received no support, no calls, no nothing from the Covenant. I am seriously considering moving into another denomination."

Still others have equally painful experiences, yet cling to the denomination as "home." For some, the support and encouragement of peers gives them affirmation and a sense of belonging. For others, the amount of time and prayer they've invested in the Covenant is too precious to lose. One woman, seeking a pastoral position, wrote, "I have been in the Covenant Church for twenty-two years. I figure that God called me to this denomination for a purpose that was more than just strengthening my patience and character, as I have waited a total of nine years for calls to Covenant churches." Still another (who grew up in the Covenant) lamented, "The Covenant has no place for me. I have had to find my place in the Covenant. I will not leave my 'home' because of rude and ignorant men and women. I am valued as a person in my profession and have been actually honored several times. I have gifts that the Covenant will probably never seek to use. And I have found peace in acting locally."

The Placement Process

Of the twenty-two women who placed their names in process for a pastoral call, fewer than half received inquiries from superintendents, other pastors, or churches. Eight received phone calls from conference superintendents. Of these, two women said they were called only after they initiated the contact. Three received phone calls from church members. Ten received phone calls from search committees and nine actually met with search committees. One woman who was contacted by a search committee said, "The committee was not interested in me, but wanted my expertise in finding someone else." Nine of the graduates were contacted by the senior pastor of the church seeking staff. Two received phone calls from other pastors informing them of an available job. Seven indicated other contacts. These included staff ministers making contact with the

graduate, the seminary dean introducing the graduate to a pastor he knew who was seeking to hire a staff person, and finding out on one's own that a church was looking for an interim pastor and applying for the position.

Several of the women acknowledged the candor of certain superintendents who, in the interview process during senior year, told them to anticipate difficulties in placement. Others had more distressing encounters: “[Some of the superintendents] didn’t even ask me about my call or gifts—instead, how I liked being married....One asked how long I’d be willing to wait for a call in the Covenant, and I answered, ‘I only have one lifetime.’”

As expected, the placement process was experienced differently by the various respondents. Of those whose experience was largely positive, there were two main contributing factors. One was the presence of an advocate or a motivated search committee. One part-time pastor writes, “My mentor and senior pastor, Swedish Lutheran (ELCA), really wanted me to work with him and convinced the church it would be good for all parties.” An associate pastor writes, “[Placement was] easy due to male colleagues who served as advocates. However, without this advocacy I doubt I would have a call even though I’ve received two inquiries to move to other churches.” A woman with pastoral experience in several churches says, “In my first call, my predecessor took the initiative in preparing the congregation for the possibility for calling a female pastor. He did so by leading a biblical study of women in ministry, by inviting a woman seminarian to supply the pulpit, and through quiet advocacy. The search committee, therefore, was prepared to receive and to consider seriously my profile when the superintendent presented it to them.” Yet another pastor, recently called to a church, wrote that the search committee “did an exceptional job preparing the congregation to entertain and vote on a woman candidate....Maybe the process [we] went through could be a model for other Covenant churches.”

Another factor contributing to positive placement experiences was the uniqueness of being female clergy. One pastor wrote, “In my interview during the candidating weekend, one of the members of the committee reminded the others of a neighboring congregation’s positive experience with a woman pastor, saying, ‘If they can, so can we.’ When the time came for a decision, the congregation voted overwhelmingly, although not unanimously, to extend the call to me.” One of the orientation students, employed as a staff minister in a Covenant church, wrote that placement as a woman “has not been an obstacle at all.” Another pastor, with extensive experience, reflected that it was “easier. I was identifiable,

unique, had contacts throughout the Covenant. [On the other hand] no congregation seeks a woman as their pastor, but has to be persuaded and then test the woman out.”

Some of this positive attitude toward the female gender carries over into other cultures as well. One missionary writes, “Where I serve, a new national church organization was born/established in December of 1997. This organization...has already in its first meeting decided that women can be ordained. Not only that, but they also elected a woman as the president of the national board. In a Latin country and for the first meeting, that is incredible!”

However, after twenty years there are still numerous obstacles hindering women in the placement process. One is geographic location. If a female needs to remain in a certain area while her husband finishes school or after her employment with a church is terminated, it is often difficult to find work in another Covenant church nearby. This holds true for male clergy as well.

Second, clergy couples often experience unique challenges in the placement process. One might expect it to be easier for a woman to get a job “through her husband,” but often her gifts are not validated in the process. One co-pastor explained that she did go through the interview process, but that some superintendents told her “that I should *volunteer* my services to my future husband’s church, since it was a shame for him to leave the church [so we could find a co-pastorate elsewhere]. However, a couple of superintendents were excited about [him] and me as a team in the future.” Another co-pastor wrote that “being a clergy couple provides a challenge. When looking for placement, churches look first at my husband who has had...more years of experience.”

A third obstacle is discrimination. Some women graduates have experienced discrimination from conference superintendents. “Only one time did I ask the superintendent for a church. I was willing to go a great distance. His word to me has echoed in my ears a long time: ‘There is no place for a woman in ministry in [this state].’ I asked for my name to be given by the previous superintendent for [Church X]. It never was. And a lady on that committee said my name was never even given. So helpless, to be invisible, yes I was.” A staff minister identified hidden opposition within the local church as a difficulty. “I feel I had conference and church support in my placement. My difficulties have arisen out of members within the church who have other backgrounds (Moody Bible Institute) who demonstrate through [speech] and attitude that they do not submit to my pastoral authority.” Others have experienced

more overt sexism. One woman, not currently serving a church, claims, “Churches don’t want a woman [pastor] with a young child or with more than one child.” Still another wrote, “I learned from the conference superintendent that because I had a baby and was forced to resign my job that my name had been taken *off* the pastoral eligibility list for one year without my knowledge or consent!” Gender discrimination is perceived not only by pastors in the United States, but by some missionaries as well. One wrote, “The Japan Covenant Church seems to ‘handle/place’ single women pastors okay, but the cultural expectations on married moms GREATLY change things.”

A fourth obstacle is the struggle to develop an appropriate pastoral role for oneself. While this is a concern for both male and female clergy, it is particularly important to women entering a predominantly male profession. The lack of female role models and the limited types of traditional church positions (pastor, associate, youth minister) constrain women in the full development of their gifts. An astute graduate observes, “My gifts don’t naturally fit positions acceptable for women in the Covenant so I feel these are not looked at and I don’t have the opportunity to develop these and gain experience. Superintendents don’t shoot straight with me. When I’m offered placement as a pastor (solo, etc.), it’s only been at a dying church or one that had eaten several pastors alive.” One of the graduates in the early eighties said placement “was impossible for me. I was told by one superintendent that I ‘was not political enough.’ As I look back now, I am aware that I was not assertive enough. I was too much of a fifties type woman—nice, quiet, and did not speak my mind. I also did not have a mentor. That would have helped. Nor had I defined what my call to ministry meant to me. Or what I believed my gifts for ministry consisted of. In other words, I had not developed a voice. And certainly in the Covenant I needed a voice and words to have found my calling to ministry. The Covenant did not have security in itself to allow a woman time to develop her ministry, or to find her voice and her words.” Still another is finding it difficult to branch out into other areas of ministry: “After several years in chaplaincy, I resigned due to cutbacks in our CPE program. I put my name in the placement process [for a church] and have heard nothing for a year.” Even when filling a ministry position, a woman often encounters congregational skepticism, e.g., can she be a capable youth pastor? Is she a competent leader? Will she be as committed to ministry once she has children?

Second and Third Placements

Ten years ago the perception of those seeking a second call to a ministry position was that the process was as difficult, or even more difficult, than the first. In the ensuing ten years the perception has become more optimistic. Of the thirty-eight respondents, seventeen shared accounts of second or third placement experiences. Three of the most positive responses were from women who left the Covenant and found employment in other denominations. Of the fourteen remaining in the Covenant, several have happily secured second positions. One pastor wrote, “I think both placements were open—especially because the positions were staff, not a senior pastor or solo position.” A chaplain wrote that the second placement was “easier in that I am better known and more self-confident.” Several attributed their success to working independently of the superintendents and Department of Ministry. One woman wrote, “The two placements I’ve had were both easy once I got in the right place and I made the contacts....I have never gotten any of my jobs through the system. It has not worked for me. I do not see this as changing either. My jobs have come as a result of my working to make my own contacts.” Another, more recent, graduate remarks that for her, “contacts came quite out of the blue. No superintendent has been directly involved and I think that has served me well.” Some women, however, found a superintendent to be very supportive: “The invitation to the third call went well and came more quickly than I had expected. The superintendent of the conference in which the calling church is located was helpful in facilitating conversation between me and the search committee.” Women who co-pastor churches with their husbands generally found second placements to be no more difficult than the first. Several women also claimed that networking helped them make the transition to a second job. One orientation student said that because of her contacts, she was asked to plant a new church. An associate pastor stated that she got her second position because she contacted a staff member at the open church and she knew the senior pastor from NPTS.

Among those encountering difficulty in the second and third placement process, several reasons were cited. One was resistance to women in more visible roles, such as senior pastor. One revealed, “My promotion to senior pastor was very difficult. Thirty-five members left as a result of the conflict....I crashed through the stained glass ceiling, but not without scars. But our church is a much happier, healthier place now.” Another reason for placement difficulty was the perceived barrier of being the first woman in a particular position. “It has been thirteen years since I

have ministered in a church in which I was the first woman pastor. It's a lot easier to be second or third." For some women, it is difficult to get recognition for specialized ministries such as urban outreach or crisis counseling. And then there is the reality that fewer "second" jobs exist, and the wait to get such jobs is correspondingly longer. For one pastor, "The second placement was harder in that I was under pressure to move on by a certain time and was told if I didn't get placed it would be really hard to get a job." Another admitted, "It took four years to receive a call to the third and last Covenant church I served." Still another said, "It took a long time for a viable option to be presented to me as a second call—more than eight years. Once the contact had been made, however, the process went well."

Varieties of Gifts...Varieties of Service...Varieties of Working

In 1 Corinthians 12:4–6 the apostle Paul describes the spiritual gifts given to the people of God this way: "Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of working, but it is the same God who inspires them all in every one." The truth of this passage is clearly manifested in the lives of the thirty-eight respondents. Of this group, only eleven have been employed in church-based, pastoral ministry ever since graduating from NPTS—nine in the Covenant, two in other denominations. Several more have worked as chaplains the entire time since graduation. Two are missionaries. Most have sought other service occupations—teaching, pantry ministry, administration—to utilize their gifts. The resourcefulness of these graduates is evident in the job choices they have made even when doors to churches have remained closed.

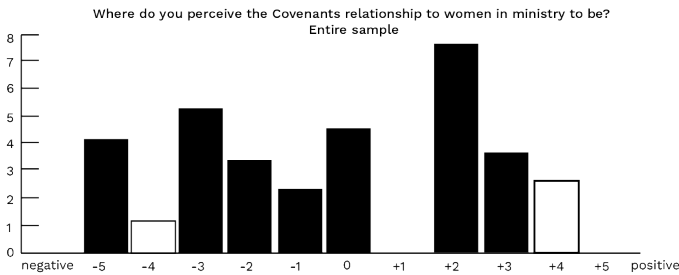
Flexibility is another characteristic of this group. Some have pursued further study while awaiting a call to ministry. Others have worked to put their husbands through school. Some have shifted between various ministries, such as from working with youth to working as chaplains. Two serve as visible leaders in other denominations, one as the newly elected director of a D.Min. program in a seminary and the other as director of a national department of evangelism. Some have taken time off from ministry after having children, while others have continued in their professions as working mothers. Some have worked part-time or have ministered as volunteers. They have used their manifold gifts in a variety of service. As one graduate (not working in a church) wrote on her response form, "I resort to my own personal conviction and Scripture: Romans 11:29, 'For the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable.' There

are the gifts of passion for the Word and for the Church. There are also gifts developed in the course of ministry. The gifts and the call are still with me. They are expressed creatively outside the church.”

The Covenant’s Relationship to Women in Ministry

The survey asked of respondents: “Mark an X where you perceive the Covenant’s relationship to women in ministry to be.”

Thirty-three responses were marked. Seventeen placed negative marks on the chart, four marked zero, and twelve marked positive responses. Three responses of -0.5, +1.5, and +2.5 were rounded up to the next larger number in the bar graphs.

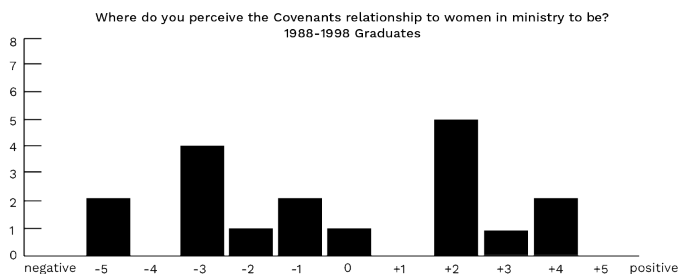
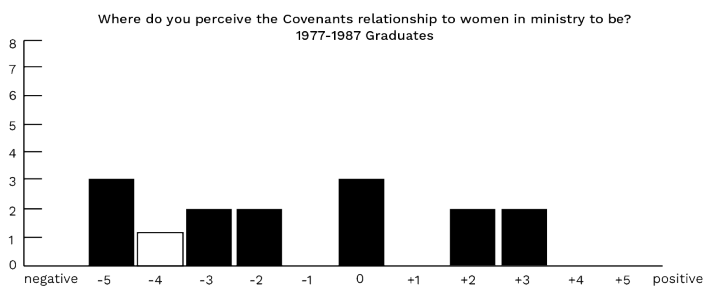


As expected, of the twelve women giving positive responses, all but one are currently employed in ministry. The one who is not currently in ministry has been a pastor in the past and hopes to find a new ministry position again soon. There is a clear correlation between employment rates and satisfaction with the denomination. Yet the majority (seven) of positive respondents fell into the cautiously optimistic quadrant (0 to 2.5). Only five were clearly optimistic (2.5 to 5). While they are grateful for their own opportunities to serve Christ in ministry, they are also aware of the need for overall progress in the promotion of female clergy in the denomination. A chaplain wrote, “I think there are many who are supportive, especially in the ministerium. The downside is their voice is never heard or raised and there’s too much contentment [with] not rocking the boat.” A co-pastor wrote, “I think the Covenant has come a long way, but has a long way to go. I also think that there are some women who have a very easy time if they are well-liked, not picky, etc....but I think the Covenant overall could be doing better at the entire issue.” Of those who voted zero, all are employed in Covenant ministry.

Of the seventeen women giving negative responses to this question, ten are employed as pastors or chaplains (in the Covenant or other denominations), one is not working, one is in the search process for a pastorate, and the rest have found alternative employment. The majority of these women (twelve) fell into the clearly pessimistic quadrant (-2.5 to -5). An interesting finding is that among these twelve, seven are employed in ministry. Just like their more optimistic colleagues, they gratefully acknowledge their own opportunities while expressing concern for others. Five of the women were cautiously pessimistic.

Compared to the entire sample in 1988, there is a wider range of responses given in 1998, reflecting the increasing number of women who have experienced placement in ministry positions. In 1988 only three out of nineteen rated the Covenant's relationship to women in ministry as positive. In the 1998 survey, twelve out of thirty-three rated it as positive. Still, that accounts for only one-third of all women graduates. Nearly two-thirds rated the Covenant at zero or below.

In the 1998 survey, the numbers shift slightly between the two decades.



More graduates in the second decade are optimistic about the Covenant's relationship to women in ministry than those in the first decade. In part, this reflects the fact that (1) all of those voting positive are employed in ministry, and (2) most are still in first-time ministry positions, not having experienced the potential stress and discouragement of seeking a second or third position as have the first decade graduates.

Their Concerns

The concerns women graduates express about the Covenant in 1998 have not changed substantively in ten years. The great majority voiced concern about the continued dichotomy between written policy and practice, promises and actual placement, seminary support and denominational resistance, collegiality with peers vs. suspicion from churches:

"The leadership is more supportive than the grassroots people are."

"Lots of support on the seminary level...but the local church still has a way to go."

"More verbal commitment than actual."

Most respondents specifically mentioned their concern about the lack of teaching in Covenant congregations about the biblical basis for women in ministry, as well as the lack of strong support by denominational leaders on this issue. This perceived ambivalence of the Covenant toward women clergy plays out in many arenas:

"The once opened door has been shut to a crack in the present administration. Women pastors never are invited to speak to full assemblies [of the denomination]—only non-M.Div./ordained women in non-pastoral ministries."

"My sense is that the Covenant's affirmation of women in ministry is more intellectual than spiritual or practical. The Word says we are not to quench the Holy Spirit. When it comes to women in ministry, I think the Covenant is quenching the Holy Spirit. This is especially true in [a lack of] openness to women as associate superintendents, superintendents, and church planters. Where is it written that God has not called women to such ministries?"

"My sense is that the Covenant is in retreat. Denominational leaders appear to be unwilling to take a strong stance in support of women in ministry. Could they truly believe the struggle is behind us, or that it is unimportant? When was the last time our president addressed this issue in his newsletter to clergy or in missives to Covenanters, or superintendents in their letters to congregations? How careful is the Board of the Ministry to question [male] candidates for ordination on their willingness to serve

in a collegial relationship with women peers? If candidates are unwilling to support the Covenant's decision to ordain women, how can they be ordained as Covenant ministers?"

This was the majority view of the respondents. However, two other concerns appeared in the responses, representing the extreme ends of the response spectrum. One pertained to the positive experience of women in ministry. Several women stated firmly, "I have not experienced negative attitudes or comments while serving in a Covenant church," or, "My experiences as an intern pastor in the United States and as an ordained missionary on the field and at home have been positive." Another pastor urged the denomination to "keep the happy and 'successful' women out in front of people." In actuality, many of the respondents experience the positive side of ministry. In their answers they frequently express gratitude for their calling and the affirmation they've received when allowed to use their gifts in the service of God. However, the frustrations are also real, and to deny them does a disservice to the experience of dozens of women clergy. One chaplain wryly listed all the comments she's received that attempt to disconfirm this aspect of women clergy's experience: "I'm tired of this issue. Can't we just let it rest?" "What's the big deal anyway? I prefer men as my pastors." "You must be a liberal feminist if you support women in ministry." "Can't we just talk about the gospel instead of issues?"

A second concern, reflecting a more extreme position, comes from those deeply disillusioned with the denomination. Their voices, too, should be heard. One former pastor, who was undermined by a toxic congregation, wrote, "I have been in a 'resigned' position for [several] years and can finally talk about this without crying. I felt such a deep sense of call. I was sure it would work. But it nearly killed me. I am glad to be alive." Another former pastor stated, "I believe the Covenant to be a misogynist, sexist denomination; especially the elected leadership. I, sadly, have given up hope on the Covenant. I think women should be discouraged from pursuing an M.Div., unless they want to be chaplains or in specialized ministry." Still another wrote, "I believe the Covenant Church and Ministerium sinned against its women who obtained their degrees." The pain in these responses needs to be heard and validated as part of the full spectrum of experience of seminary graduates.

Suggested Interventions

"If you had a magic wand, what would you do with it to aid the progress of women in ministry in the Covenant?" This question was repeated

verbatim from the 1988 questionnaire. One respondent quipped, “Speed up time twenty years.” Another conceded, “Magic won’t change sexism, only hard work by women and men working together.” Striking, however, was the consistency of answers between the two surveys. The 1998 survey reiterated all of the suggestions from 1988, only with added force. Obviously, not much progress has been made in ten years.

The wishes and suggestions fell into six groupings. The first was the need for change within the denominational leadership. After twenty years, the dichotomy between lip service and reality in the issue of placement of women in ministry appears more intentional and discouraging. A critical need is for elected leaders to offer strong and visible support on this issue. “Make sure anyone in a power position within the Covenant [is] fully supportive of women in ministry, a true and willing advocate.” “Make it a priority, a passion burning in the hearts and minds of superintendents to educate search committees...on the merits [and] necessity of considering female candidates.” Another pastor suggested bringing in outside consultants from denominations that have been more successful in placing women (such as the United Methodist Church) to train our superintendents to be more effective in presenting women candidates to churches. Another suggested a more broad-based approach. “I think the Covenant should hold a denomination-wide consultation on women in ministry, something on the order of the Consultation on the Cities held in November [1992]. Such a gathering would include denominational executives, superintendents, leaders of our educational institutions, and conference leaders, both clergy and lay, women and men, and of course, women clergy. The agenda would include storytelling, with stories of both sunshine and shadows, both the joyous and the painful, [and] a review of the current status of women in ministry. A major goal of the consultation would be to develop a denomination-wide strategy for the calling of women to pastoral positions in Covenant churches and for means of providing ongoing support to them in their ministries.”

A second set of suggestions called for a comprehensive educational program within the denomination on the biblical basis for women in ministry. This would include writing study guides for local churches, training people to lead workshops for churches (similar to Vision to Action and Evangelism Associates), providing continuing education for regional ministeriums, and requiring seminary classes on this subject.

A third suggestion was to plug the gap wherever possible. Even as women are educated in seminary and called to ministry, the Covenant experiences significant erosion of its accomplishments by allowing male

clergy to undermine collegiality with their female peers. One pastor who left the Covenant wrote, “Don’t allow the circulation of a candidate’s profile unless he can give (teach) a biblical rationale for women in ministry and promise to teach this in every church.” This recommendation was seconded by a more recent graduate who commented that many of her male classmates were supportive of women in ministry but said “they never could stand up publicly for this or their church; family of origin/wife would all flip out.” Another pastor wrote, “Hold superintendents accountable for placing women.” Another insisted “that the Board of the Ministry require ordination candidates to sign a statement (similar to the one on baptism) affirming the ordination of women.”

A fourth set of suggestions concerned how to make the placement process fairer. These included requiring superintendents to submit profiles of female clergy to every church seeking staff and streamlining resumes to make them gender-blind. “I would have a personal page with personal data and picture on a separate sheet. I’d have the remainder [of the profile] identify the pastor/student by social security number so there would not be a gender bias in the initial sifting process. Sometimes the best person for a job is a woman!”

While several respondents acknowledged that “there are some good role models out there,” another frequent suggestion was to expose local churches to more female pastors. One pastor wished, “I’d have hundreds and thousands of Covenanters experience deep, profound, loving ministry from a woman Covenant pastor. Those who are so touched seem to change their negative attitudes into more positive, supportive ones.” A missionary wrote, “Help all the people in the churches to understand that it is God who calls us, and to disobey his call whether you are a man or a woman is to sin. We are all his servants, and people need to quit looking at the gender and start looking at the blessing that God has called another one of his people into full-time pastoral ministry and that they have answered that call by obeying.” A military chaplain wrote, “I have been assigned to two tours in which I have been ‘the first woman,’ including my current role as command chaplain....Once people are exposed to a woman pastor, the fear dissipates. The key is exposure of any kind—interns, interims, pulpit supply.” Another pastor wished that “every church would have a woman preach at least twice a year so that people could become familiar with a woman in the pulpit.”

A new finding that did not appear in the 1988 survey is the clear recognition that the appointment/election of women to visible pastoral leadership positions in the denomination is long overdue. There was a

frequent call for women superintendents and associate superintendents. “The Covenant needs a woman co-executive director of ministry.” “Half of all new ‘mission pastors’ should be women; half of all Covenant administrators should be women.”

After twenty years it is clear there is no documented strategy in the Covenant for promoting the cause of women in ministry. There is no one person responsible for advocating, mentoring, and monitoring the progress of women in ministry. There is no tracking of female seminary graduates by the denomination to determine the effectiveness of the current placement process with regard to females. There is no person (other than a superintendent or executive director of the ministry, who also affect one’s placement) to whom one can bring grievances directly related to the concerns of women in ministry. In summary, the denomination is not structured to facilitate the acceptance of women clergy in its midst. In light of this, several expressed hope that the new Association for Covenant Clergy Women, a voluntary association formed at the 1998 Midwinter Conference, would address some of these concerns and become an effective support network for women.

Summary

After ten years, several of the trends noted in the 1988 survey remain unchanged. Only a third of the seminary’s female graduates are pastors in Covenant churches. One-fourth serve in specialized ministries. Only half of those who sought a call upon graduation were ever contacted by a superintendent or search committee. Many continue to experience discrimination from some male superiors and peers and within churches.

But some things have changed. Several women have experienced the joy of receiving a second or third call. The placement process is often easier the second time around. Fewer graduates have left the denomination in the past decade. Appreciation is expressed for supportive male colleagues and receptive congregations.

After twenty years, women graduates have acquired longer vision and can identify patterns of discrimination more readily. Their investment in the denomination has also increased, as indicated in their thoughtful suggestions for future strategies. The thirty-eight women who responded to this survey represent over one hundred years of seminary education at North Park, thirty-eight years of internship, and hundreds of years of Covenant upbringing. By participating in this survey, they have shared their deepest convictions and the truth of their own experience within the larger Covenant family. How will we receive this gift?

My hope is that ten years from now we will not need to call for another survey, but will be celebrating successful implementation of the strategies recommended by these colleagues in ministry. Indicators of success would be an increase in the numbers of female seminary students finding jobs after graduation; a reduction in the amount of time spent between first and second jobs; an overall increase in the number of employed women clergy in the Covenant in all capacities (chaplain, educator), but especially as local church pastors; and the appointment or election of qualified females to visible and powerful posts within the administration. Success would further be indicated by change in denominational policies to ensure fairer hiring practices, and by increasing numbers of positive reports from churches of the love and care received from their female pastors. As one pastor beautifully stated her hope: Soften the hearts, open the eyes, heal the wounds, take away the fear.⁷

Endnotes

1 Mary Miller, "A Decade Later: North Park Theological Seminary Female M.Div. Graduates (1977–1987)," *The Covenant Quarterly* Vol. XLVI, No. 4 (November 1988), 6–26.

2 Ibid., 19.

3 1998 *Covenant Quarterly* Survey:

What year did you graduate from North Park Theological Seminary? With what degree?

What was your church membership upon entrance to North Park?

What is your present church membership?

Are you ordained?

As of March 1, 1998, are you presently serving a Covenant church? If yes, what is your job title? Part-time or full-time?

Is this a church in which you were a layperson before earning your theological degree?

Are you presently serving a church of another denomination?

If yes, name of denomination, job title, part-time or full time?

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

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

If no, indicate the reasons:

Decision to enter specialized ministry

Change in job interest

Anticipated difficulty in the Covenant's placement process

Theological differences with denomination

Other

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

Phone calls from conference superintendents

Phone calls from church members

Phone calls from search committees

Meetings with church search committees

Meetings with congregations

Senior pastor of church needing multiple staff

Phone call from pastor near the open church who called to inform you of opening

Other

What work have you done since graduating from North Park?
Paid/unpaid?

If you have served in more than one church since graduation, how would you compare the second or third placement process with the first? Easier/harder/ other? In what ways?

If you were a member of the Covenant upon entering North Park but are not a member now, please circle some of the reasons for your change: theological differences, inability to find placement in a Covenant church, change in career goals, more support for women in ministry elsewhere. Comments ...

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

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

Negative -5 -4 -3 -2 -1 0 +1 +2 +3 +4 +5 Positive

If you had a magic wand, what would you do with it to aid the progress of women in ministry in the Covenant?

Comments of encouragement and/or discouragement.

Name (optional). Date.

- 4 Thanks to Lenore Knight of NPU and Lindsay Armfield of NPTS, who researched school records, and to Dotty Anderson in the Department of the Ministry for supplying some current addresses.
- 5 This list is still incomplete. Any NPTS female MDiv graduates who did not receive the questionnaire are encouraged to mail their names and addresses to Isolde Anderson so we can update our records.
- 6 Of the twenty-two who did not respond to the survey and the four who responded anonymously, eight are ordained in the Covenant (one is inactive, one serves an independent church), seven hold some form of ministerial license with the ECC, six are not licensed for ministry, three have left the denomination; the status of the others is unknown.
- 7 Thanks to Jim Lundeen of the Office of Compassion, Mercy, and Justice for covering the mailing costs associated with this survey, and to Janet Lungren for providing administrative support in developing the initial database and handling the mailing of the surveys and follow-up cards.

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

*Amanda Olson, pastor, Grace Evangelical Covenant Church,
Chicago, Illinois, and Mae Cannon, executive pastor,
Hillside Covenant Church, Walnut Creek, California*

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

The First Decade

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

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

2 Ibid.

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

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

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

Twenty Years Later

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

4 Miller, "A Decade Later," 7.

5 *Ibid.*, 11, 8.

6 *Ibid.*, 9.

7 *Ibid.*, 9–10.

8 *Ibid.*, 12.

9 *Ibid.*, 15.

10 *Ibid.*, 19.

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

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

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

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

Three Decades Later

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

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

13 *Ibid.*, 21.

14 *Ibid.*, 30.

15 *Ibid.*, 26.

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

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

Thirty-Year Study Results

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

A Direct Comparison: NPTS MDiv Graduates Survey Results.

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

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

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

Reflection on the Results

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Current Statistics

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

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

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

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

Looking Back, Looking Ahead

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Questions for 2008 Women in Ministry Survey

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

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

2. With what degree did you graduate?

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

²⁴ Miller, “A Decade Later,” 19.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

- Yes No

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

12. Are you married?

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

Please specify what role: _____

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

- Easier Other
 Harder Please explain your answer _____

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

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

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

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

Positive _____ Negative

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

Very supported _____ No support

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

22. Comments of encouragement and/or discouragement _____

23. Name (optional). _____

Date. _____

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

For additional information on the 2016 Covenant clergywomen survey, readers may contact Lenore Knight Johnson directly at lenore.knightjohnson@trnty.edu. The author wishes to thank Trinity Christian College for supporting this research through a Faculty Development Summer Research Grant and the Commission on Biblical Gender Equality of the ECC for funding the online survey subscription. Additional thanks go to Hauna Ondrey for significant guidance throughout all stages of the research process, Carolyn Poterek, and Danielle Ng as well as other Develop Leaders staff who assisted in organizing the list of credentialed women for the survey sample.

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.

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 Clergwomen 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 clergy-women 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.

Reviews

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Holly Berkley Fletcher, *The Missionary Kids: Unmasking the Myths of White Evangelicalism* (Broadleaf Books, 2025), 291 pages, \$26.

Written from an insider (albeit second generation) perspective, Holly Berkley Fletcher's book guides us, sometimes carefully and sometimes with less care, through an invisible but religiously venerated minefield: the missionary calling. Fletcher answers a question she never explicitly asks, "Are the children of missionaries also missionaries?" Her answer is a resounding no. Part confessional, part instructional, this text journeys through the complexities of those who have seen the underbelly of American evangelical missions, which Fletcher labels the most relentless and dogged pursuit of the religious conversion of the whole world (34).

Fletcher uses the term "third-culture." Readers unfamiliar with this term may find Fletcher's a disturbing introduction, rather like sifting through the ashes after a fire. For others, her critique may reinforce old tropes of Christian mission as cultural destruction, oppression, and religious enslavement. Even though Fletcher states that she does not wish to "diminish the good [missionaries] have done or disrespect any of them personally" (13), readers may find it hard to separate Fletcher's debunking the so-called "myth of evangelical missions" from the actual work of those they know in global service.

Fletcher admits to having grown up in a social structure she calls the “missionary bubble,” or “a temporary, imported, usually highly privileged world that lives inside [foreign] places” (77). This reality is often hidden from the sending church. In the past, the missionary compound was a physical reality for many reasons. Today the bubble is less physically present, but it is intimately related to class and social standing. In a sweeping condemnation, Fletcher categorizes all present-day American Christians, wherever they live, as having “bubble-wrapped themselves so tightly, it strangles their relationships with those outside their world...inhaling only what others of their insular communities exhale” (94). The author’s willingness to admit to the shame of having lived in the missionary bubble while growing up in another country and never learning the language or much of the culture has caused her to change her self-description from, “I’m from Kenya,” to saying that she was raised there. Such honesty among those raised third-culture is admirable when they are faced with the ever-awkward question, “Where are you from?”

If the reader can move beyond the snide comments and adolescent humor, some important instruction can be found. Especially for those, like me, who have invested heart and soul into participating with God’s priorities in the world, this is an important read. How often do any of us, much less missionaries, listen to our adult children? When do we listen to their perspectives and interpretations of what we did or valued? How have our vocations impacted the lives of our offspring? As one of my own kids told me, “I loved everything about being a missionary kid except for the mission part.” This book falls into the genre of a “tell-all,” reflecting some of the pain and snarkiness that might be found in a similar work by the adult children of any parents of notoriety. Traumatic childhood stories are not limited to “missionary kids” (also known as MKs). Good, godly parenting, wherever it takes place, requires de-mythologizing the Christian life: we know that struggles happen to Christ’s followers, even when we’d like to pretend otherwise. Fletcher’s book is an appeal for those of us who claim to be in Christ: she asks us to look straight at truth and still recognize grace.

The book is divided into three sections, each dedicated to debunking a major myth of the missionary life: the myth of calling, the myth of multiculturalism, and the myth of saints. Another myth that could have been expanded is that of the modern messiah briefly alluded to in her sardonic comment, “Whatever did the Lord do before there were American Christians?” (34).

Missing completely is the reminder that God is still at work in the world bringing restoration and order back into our personal and collective forms of chaos. God's global mission is not over; we (the church and all its missionaries) just need to be constantly re-converted. Of all the possible creative ways to accomplish divine purposes, the Creator continues to use flawed jars of clay. This is no excuse for laziness, lack of accountability, or the infliction of trauma on anyone, particularly children, whether our own or others, but is a call to reflection. I heartily agree with the author's statement that "missionaries who put their kids in traumatizing or dangerous situations are not 'heroes of the faith.' They are bad parents" (53).

Fletcher ends with a final word of hope. "I believe God invites us to trade control for faith, power for community, certainty for peace" (260). Following Fletcher's thread of hope will serve as a good word of warning for all parents in every missional situation, wherever parenting takes place.

PAUL H. DE NEUI

Leah Libresco Sargeant, *The Dignity of Dependence: A Feminist Manifesto* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2025), 219 pages, \$28.

In *Dignity of Dependence*, Leah Libresco Sargeant asks how we can live in a world that is "the wrong shape for women." In a New York Times podcast, Ross Douthat asks whether the workplace is "not fitted for women." Sargeant responds, "I think it's hostile to yours, too, Ross, because you are a human being who will one day die." In both the interview and this book Sargeant argues that when personhood is defined as autonomy, women are the first to be left out. Autonomy, she notes, is understood as freedom from others' needs.

Sargeant frames her argument for dependence in chapter 2 around the story of Robert Rice, a seventy-nine-year-old man trapped by a California snowstorm. Due to the snow, he was unable to back out of his driveway to visit his dying wife. In an act of desperation, he posted on Facebook, "This is embarrassing for me to ask for help." Neighbors quickly responded with shovels and a tractor to dig him out. Sargeant writes, "We are called not to accommodate dependence as a brute, unpleasant fact, but to knit dependence deeply into our understanding of what it means to be a human being." Care is not something earned, despite Robert Rice's hours spent trying to dig out his car with arthritic hands. Giving and receiving care are woven into what it means to be human.

For Sargeant, motherhood becomes the site from which humanity rediscovers that creaturely life is constituted by dependence. Women are welcomed into corporate life only insofar as they can perform according to norms shaped around male bodies. This often requires women to suppress or minimize the biological realities of reproduction: pregnancy, breastfeeding, recovery, even the rhythms of their menstrual cycles. These interruptions reveal that flourishing and dependence are inseparable. As Sargeant writes, “Children pierce illusions of autonomy.” When a need is “intimately bound to us,” like an infant in the womb or a nursing child, Sargeant argues that such moments teach us what it means to be human.

“The human project is better understood not as self-creation, apart from the world, but as apprehension of the world, with the self being the one to grow and change to harmonize with what is true,” Sargeant writes. Freedom for men and women alike depends on an “honest account of the human person.” Dependence is constitutive rather than accidental. Vulnerability is not a temporary condition of childhood, illness, or disability, but an ontological marker of creatureliness. Selfhood is received through the networks of care and relationships that sustain us. Communion, being given to and sustained by one another, is not a metaphor but a posture of human life.

Sargeant’s emphasis on dependence exposes the fragility of the care networks that hold our lives together. Women care for children who are home sick from school, elderly parents, and children and adults with disabilities. While women may have a unique relationship to care because of reproductive realities, they do not bear a unique responsibility for care work. This invisible labor performed by women has no place within a market-driven liberal society. Sargeant seeks not to reject feminism altogether but to recover a vision of humanity grounded in mutual dependence.

Sargeant’s work reminds us that dependence is not a failure but is woven into the fabric of our common life. The Book of Common Prayer gives voice to Sargeant’s vision: “O God, your unfailing providence sustains the world we live in and the life we live...grant that we may never forget that our common life depends upon each other’s toil” (64). This prayer articulates two central claims that shape Sargeant’s book. The first is an admission of our neediness and creatureliness before God. It is only by God’s providence, not our expertise, that this fragile world is sustained. Second, life together depends upon one another’s toil, not on independence.

Sargeant's book matters now because it restores the embodied, relational account of the human that our culture has forgotten. If Dorothy Sayers asked a century ago whether women are human, Sargeant asks a deeper question: who counts as a person at all?

LINDSEY GIBSON

Cleophus J. LaRue, ed. *This Is My Story: Testimonies and Sermons of Black Women in Ministry* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 216 pages, \$15.

This Is My Story is more than a book. It is a sacred encounter with sister-friends. This inspiring collection of testimonies and sermons by thirteen Black women in ministry offers readers an invitation to be a part of an up close and personal experience of God's faithfulness through the many challenges, obstacles, and wounds of ministry. Each chapter pairs an authentic narrative with a sermon not from a pedestal, but from the lived journey of struggle, surrender, joy, and faith by fire.

The testimonies are deeply transparent, courageous, and raw. Cokiesha Bailey's story opens the book with her honest wrestling between pleasing God and honoring her minister father who disapproved of women preachers. Her touching testimony moves through transformation toward reconciliation over years, culminating in her father's public apology and affirmation of her ministry call. Others, like Claudette Copeland's, reflect on what it means to be "all dressed up with nowhere to go"—gifted, prepared, yet repeatedly denied opportunity by the institutional "power grid." These stories are not easy, but they are necessary. They reflect the unique challenges Black women navigated then and now: the intersection of gender, race, and calling within spaces that may affirm in word but resist in practice.

What makes this book so rich is the way the sermons grow out of the stories. The sermons are theologically strong on their own, but alongside the testimonies they become embodied truths of experience and wisdom. Alyson Diane Browne's sermon "Straighten Up!" speaks to her own journey from burnout to healing in a creative first-person narrative in the voice of the bent-over woman Jesus healed on the Sabbath. Deborah Blanks preaches "Telling God Where It Hurts," not as biblical theory but as someone who has ministered in spaces of injustice and communal pain.

Although the collection represents different backgrounds, contexts, denominations, and ministry vocations, there are recurring themes: the

cost of obeying God's call in the face of resistance, the power of perseverance, the ache for visibility, the necessity of allies—both women and men—and a passion for serving the Lord that refuses to die.

Although at times painful to read, each chapter is a celebration and declaration insisting Black women are not fringe contributors to the Church; rather, they are central to its witness. The Church is richer when their stories are told, their sermons are heard, and their leadership is honored. *This Is My Story* is a book for such a time as this. It will affirm every woman called to ministry and seeking her way through the obstacle course of male bias and power. It will encourage those who are weary in the journey not to give up, because you are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses. And it will challenge every reader to listen more deeply to the wounds and the witness of Black women in ministry—sisters God has indeed called and gifted.

TAMMY LONG

Wylin D. Wilson, *Womanist Bioethics: Social Justice, Spirituality, and Black Women's Health* (New York University Press, 2025), 215 pages, \$30.

Within the field of theological bioethics, modern bioethics—particularly the principlist framework advanced by Tom Beauchamp and James Childress—has been subject to sustained critique. While many of these critiques are substantive and worthwhile, they often remain incomplete, offering only deconstructive commentary without proposing constructive alternatives. In *Womanist Bioethics: Social Justice, Spirituality, and Black Women's Health* Wylin Wilson not only offers a critique of modern bioethics from the perspective of the Black church in America but also takes the vital and often neglected step of constructing an alternative framework. In doing so, Wilson develops a womanist bioethical paradigm capable of liberating the “evolution of mainstream American bioethical discourse and practice” (5).

Wilson organizes the book into three broad movements. The first, comprising the opening three chapters, focuses on historical development. Across these chapters, she traces the implications of American chattel slavery for identity, vulnerability, and social status before examining the institutional responses of Black hospitals and the Black church as they sought to address the enduring effects of slavery on Black health and embodiment.

From this historical foundation, Wilson turns to theoretical construction in the next three chapters. Here she undertakes her most significant constructive work, articulating the scope and orientation of womanist bioethics. She argues that bioethics remains an underutilized resource for mediating the relationship between race and health, asserting that “adopting an expansive approach to bioethical analysis with insights from social scientific approaches that account for social structures and relationships paves the way for a braver, bolder, better bioethics” (84). Having established bioethics as the critical site for such engagement, Wilson then introduces the concept of womanism and, through a synthetic integration of womanism and bioethics, produces a distinctively womanist bioethical framework.

In the final section, Wilson turns to practical application, demonstrating how womanist bioethics might materialize in concrete contexts. The first of her two case studies addresses rural health, a topic that receives scant attention in bioethical literature. Wilson persuasively argues that womanist bioethics can “yield practical solutions for practitioners who confront diverse clients and problems associated with geographic location and layered oppression” (136). The second case study focuses on Black maternal health, showing how womanist bioethics can reframe and reorient longstanding priorities in ways that address the persistent injustices embedded in current practices of Black maternal care.

Wilson’s book balances well the dual aims of critique and reconstruction, holding together a penetrating analysis of bioethics’ limitations with a vision for its renewal. To that end, two principal strengths in *Womanist Bioethics* merit attention. First, as aforementioned, Wilson offers a unique approach in that she is both critical and constructive, a rare achievement within theological bioethics. Second, Wilson’s prose remains theologically robust while maintaining accessibility. She has written an academic text that can be read by both scholars and practitioners, making it a contribution capable of instigating substantive change within both the Church and academic bioethics.

The following observation should not be read as a critique of the book, but rather as an invitation for further development in future scholarship. The framework Wilson constructs is particularly well-suited to addressing bioethical questions at the societal or communal level; indeed, the book articulates a compelling approach to public and population health bioethics. Yet public and population health are not the only modes within the broader field of bioethics, which also encompasses such subdisciplines as clinical medical ethics and research ethics. Toward her conclusion, Wilson

gestures toward clinical ethics committees as a potential site for engaging ethical issues within healthcare. However, it remains somewhat unclear how a womanist bioethical framework might operate in clinical practice.

This critique, however, should not be understood as detracting from the quality or persuasiveness of Wilson's *Womanist Bioethics*. The book remains a significant and timely contribution, not only for bioethicists who critically engage the discipline but also for clinicians and practitioners of the Christian Church seeking to discern how the resources within their own communities can be mobilized toward the work of justice and the flourishing of all involved.

JACKSON MCNEECE

Marcus A. Mininger, *Impossible to Be Restored? Temptation and Warning in the Epistle of Hebrews* (New Studies in Biblical Theology 64, Apollos; B&H Academic, 2025), 174 pages, \$30.

The “epistle” to the Hebrews is notorious as a linguistically sophisticated and rhetorically complex text. It is lofty in its theology, makes frequent use (through both citation and allusion) to the Old Testament, and resists attempts to locate its historical situation. In the face of these daunting challenges, Marcus Mininger engages one narrow aspect of the letter’s message: the nature of the temptation the letter’s audience was facing and the meaning of the author’s warning in response to that temptation, particularly as found in Hebrews 6:1–6. By clarifying this narrow issue, Mininger hopes to shed light on the broader argument of the letter and show that “Hebrews has much to teach us all, not only by *what* it says but also by *how* it says it” (162, emphasis original).

In contrast to those who seek to reconstruct the so-called “original context” of the letter in order to discern its meaning, Mininger joins those who claim to approach the text with “interpretive restraint” (11). Thus, he pursues an exposition of the “internal thought-world” (13) of the letter, rooted in an understanding of first-century Jewish practice and the theological resources of the Old Testament in order to show how this logic helps to make the nature of the temptation and warning clearer.

After rehearsing the primary lines of interpretation on the temptation (ch. 2) and warning (ch. 3), Mininger turns to the heart of his argument (chs. 4–7) where he reexamines the language and imagery present in Hebrews 6:1–4 in order to lead toward his key insight that the primary

rhetoical dynamic in Hebrews is the relationship between the old and new covenants, where the former *leads to* the latter such that one cannot return to or choose the old covenant “without rejecting the inherent value of *both* covenants” (142, emphasis original). This case is made by illustrating three theological concepts. First, Mininger examines how metaphors of food (Heb 5:12–14) and foundation (6:1) are not synonymous but accomplish different tasks (ch. 4). Second, he explores the lists in Heb 6:1b–2 and 6:4–5 to show how the former exemplifies characteristics of the old covenant while the latter shows elements of the new (ch. 5). Third, he demonstrates, using this insight, why believers cannot simply return to the old covenant (ch. 6–7).

Essential to his argument in these chapters is the necessity of carefully and clearly understanding the words in the text, unclouded by interpolation. For example, he argues that the “baptisms” (plural form, as translated in the NRSV) in 6:2 are not Christian baptism (always in the singular) but rather the ritual washings characteristic of first-century Judaism. Similarly, he suggests that the “repentance” in Hebrews 6:4 is in fact repentance and standing *achieved through the old covenant*, and *not* repentance in Christ.

In two final chapters, Mininger relates his argument back to the overarching discourse of the letter (ch. 8). Then he offers thoughts on what Hebrews, as a letter, might reveal about the audience’s situation. He also delves into the pastoral response being offered to invested parties, including Christians today (ch. 9).

More than once in the book (as on p. 105), Meninger acknowledges that “the general consensus of past scholarship is correct,” though perhaps for reasons different than are claimed. Thus, the question necessarily emerges: Has he offered anything truly new or simply repackaged old insights with different nuance and emphasis? Has he merely found a new way of arriving at the same place?

Nevertheless Mininger offers a clear and careful analysis of Hebrews that highlights a (or perhaps the) primary line of thought within the letter in fresh ways. In particular, his analysis offers a reminder to any interpreter to resist reading meaning into the words of the text, but to discover their meaning within their own context (see “baptism” above). In this way, Mininger’s work offers pastors both a helpful presentation of *what* Hebrews says as well as modeling an approach to *how* it says it that can be transferred to the interpretation of other texts.

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