

Clergy Women: An Uphill Calling
An abstract of the study

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Whom We Surveyed

This research contains information on female and male clergy from 15 predominantly white Protestant denominations that ordain women. It does not include clergy in the historically black Protestant denominations, which were being surveyed in another study at the time of this research. However, information about ethnic minority women and men within the predominantly white Protestant denominations is included.

Finding a workable definition for "ordained clergy" for such a study is a challenge. Ordination is practiced and defined in different ways in various denominational traditions. Within some denominations there are several "kinds" of ordination: ordination to deacons orders, ordination to lay eldership, ordination to sacramental authority without full standing or access to denominational decision making, ordination with full membership in conference or diocesan structures. For the purposes of this study we have used the definition for "ordained clergy" developed by the research office of the National Council of Churches in the mid-1980s. "Ordained clergy" are defined as those clergy having "full ministry," or holding that office "having the most complete and unrestricted set of functions relating to the ministry of the Gospel, administering the Word and Sacrament or carrying out the office of pastor or priest in the church."

This research summarizes the findings from nearly 5,000 surveys provided by ordained women and men from 16 Protestant denominations in 1993 and 1994. In addition, it draws upon short telephone interviews with 124 women and the same number of men in parish ministry (distributed over all of the denominations). In order to explore some issues in depth the study also conducted 30 longer interviews (of approximately an hour or more) with clergy in a variety of ministry settings (26 women and four men). Finally, a small sample of key lay leaders in congregations served by clergy in the larger sample (600) responded to a modified form of the questionnaire given to clergy. Although ordained women and men from 16 denominations were surveyed, this report covers 15 denominations. Inadequacies in the sample of one denomination led to a decision not to include it in the summary.

The denominations surveyed vary in size, polity, and ideology--they are mainline Protestant denominations, Unitarian-Universalists, Southern Baptists and members of several small Holiness denominations which trace their origins to early Methodism. This study builds upon a smaller multi-denominational study conducted by Hartford Seminary 12 years ago involving nine mainline Protestant denominations [four of these nine denominations have since merged to reduce the number to seven]. The results of this research were published in a book entitled *Women of the Cloth* by Jackson W. Carroll, Barbara Hargrove and Adair T. Lummis (San Francisco: Harper, 1983).

What We Studied

This 1993-94 study examines what is both general and particular about the experiences of ordained clergy in the 1990s. While previous studies have often been limited to the experiences of clergy within one or a few denominations, the breadth of this sample allows for the ways in which different denominational features influence the experiences of clergy. Furthermore, by virtue of the breadth

of the sample it is possible to interpret what is common to the experiences of clergy in different institutional contexts. This research will help denominational leaders see the impact of specific institutional procedures and practices, and also allow pastors to recognize common issues and problems which they share with clergy colleagues in other traditions.

Second, this study, when compared with the earlier Women of the Cloth research, provides a unique viewpoint on how things have changed over time. It is able to show what difference 12 years makes in the situation of clergy women and men. It is able to compare career decisions and experiences, views toward work, family issues and theologies of ordination. It is also able to assess how successfully denominations and congregations are handling the rising numbers of clergy women.

How Respondents Compare in Numbers

From our collection of denominational figures in 1994, we find that the United Methodists report the largest number of ordained women overall (3,003), followed by the United Church of Christ (1,843) and the Assemblies of God (1,574). However, if we look at women as a percentage of all ordained clergy in a particular denomination, the Unitarian-Universalist Association has the highest percentage of women (30%) in their clergy workforce. The United Church of Christ has the second highest percentage (25%) followed by the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) (18%). The Southern Baptist Convention, which has formally adopted resolutions against the ordination of women, has the smallest percentage of female clergy in our sample (fewer than 1%). Taken together, the denominations in our sample have an average of 10% female clergy.

How Women Compare to Men

In spite of these developments, female clergy remain a minority in almost every area of church life. Although some observers may lament that "women are getting all the best jobs for political reasons," the numbers indicate that clergy women remain significantly underpaid and underemployed relative to men. Women are more likely to be part-time, to leave parish ministry, and to be in specialized ministries.

The first few chapters in this study document the situation of contemporary clergy women by examining the relationship of clergy women to feminism, the ways in which life styles (singleness, marriage, parenting, divorce, vocational mobility and age) affect clergy men and women. They explore the differences between male and female leadership styles, the relationship between ministerial positions and gender, lay attitudes towards clergy of both genders, and leadership effectiveness.

Pay Inequity

Chapter five shows that there are real earnings differences between male and female clergy and the ways in which denominational employment systems and placement patterns shape the career paths of clergy women and clergy men. In order to understand the differences between the average compensation packages of clergy women and clergy men, adjustments have been made for differences attributed to age, education, work experience, denomination, size of church, and position and we still find that there is a 9% salary difference. Or, put another way, women only earn 91% of the salaries of men for working the same hours, in the same types of jobs, within the same denomination, in the same sized church.

What Ordination Means to Women

Another chapter examines the understanding of ordination in contemporary Protestantism and the ways in which women and men respond to the "call." As one clergy woman lamented, "it seems that God calls and the church stalls." Because of the difficulties experienced by women we find that they are often very creative in developing options and choosing non-parish ministries instead of parish work. Clergy women are not doing things "the same old way."

Yet, clergy women are earning less than similar clergy men. Clergy women continue to have more difficulty finding a job, because denominational leadership deployment procedures consistently place women at a disadvantage. Even recent changes in denominational practices designed to develop more gender-neutral systems, advocates and appointment patterns, have not eliminated discrimination. Clergy women are unwittingly "tracked" into positions with less occupational status and promise (at least by past standards of measurement). And although family responsibilities and children are often given as reasons for career differences between women and men, it turns out that children are not a major factor in the inequities experienced by clergy women.

Ordained ministry is not "just another job." Clergy women and clergy men seek ordination because they have a sense of call and a conviction that God has a plan for their lives. They accept their ministry as a gift from God, believing that God and the church have called them to serve.

For clergy women this spiritual or Divine dimension to their profession is extremely important. It sustains them in the face of difficulties and discrimination. It informs their understanding of ministry and the world. And it is transforming common expectations of all ordained ministry. Yet, clergy women continue to have difficulties, even when they are within institutional structures that ought to offer them opportunities for advancement.

The study argues that churches need to give greater attention to the need for systemic change. If denominational leaders are actively hostile, or insensitive to finding the right ministry settings for women, women get discouraged. When this happens, it is not because women are failures--rather, it is because the system is failing women.

Ongoing patterns of passive hostility persist against women clergy, and without broader information and supportive networks some clergy women identify their problems as personal failures, rather than the limitations of the social or institutional systems in which they are located. The study suggests that if clergy women can overcome the isolation created by the personalization of their "failures," and gain an understanding that their problems are systemic rather than individual or situational, they may be able to mobilize and make significant new contributions to the churches and their ministries by expanding definitions of ordained ministry and--literally--taking the church into the world.

How Ministry Career Paths Compare

The careers of clergy women and clergy men, represented by the sequence of transitions made in their first three jobs, are different. Although having children during the first five years after ordination makes some difference in the career paths of clergy women and clergy men, gender is a more significant factor than family situation. An analysis of the actual sequences of jobs held by clergy women and clergy men shows that men are more likely to occupy "managerial type" positions and women are more likely to occupy "staff type positions." As a consequence women are

frequently "tracked" into employment in secondary labor markets--holding jobs that have less organizational power, lower salaries, less responsibility, and fewer benefits.

One reason often given for this discrepancy is that women choose to take less demanding jobs so that they can spend more time raising their families. Yet, when we compare the distribution of clergy women and clergy men across clergy positions, the evidence does not support this interpretation. Childless clergy women, as well as clergy women with children are consistently more likely to be serving in staff type positions. Our comparison of the career paths of clergy women and clergy men shows that the largest career path differences are not between parents and nonparents, but between women and men. Clergy men are more likely than women to occupy jobs with higher salaries and greater professional responsibilities. Clergy women, on the other hand, are paid less and consistently hold less responsible jobs. Clergy men tend to be stuck in very traditional and conventional congregational jobs, whereas clergy women regularly pursue more mixed, flexible and diverse career paths.

The study also highlights the difference between the career paths of clergy women and clergy men by noting the role of secular work in their careers. Clergy women, especially those who hold secular positions without "leaving the ministry" (at least in their thinking) are not following the rules. Rather, they are expanding traditional assumptions about ordained ministry beyond the image of an ecclesiastically paid full-time life-long pastor.

At the same time, some recently ordained women seem to have a weaker sense of political solidarity with other clergy women which leads them often to interpret their problems in individualist rather than institutional ways. Unfortunately, this causes clergy women to blame themselves for their difficulties, rather than recognize that it is the ecclesiastical systems that are to blame. Only when contemporary clergy women remember to shift their perspective from seeing their individual failings as the problem and recognize that institutional systems are still frustrating their careers, will they be able to help various denominational systems become more hospitable to women.

Most clergy women have a strong sense of call. At the end of the twentieth century they have come a long way, but their journey is still uphill. Yet as clergy women move into a profession historically dominated by men, they are pushing the edges of expectation and definition. The 1990s has seen a number of studies, articles and books on clergy women, documenting their contemporary experience and placing it in historic context. All of this research suggests that old patterns of clergy leadership are undergoing significant change.

The Future: An Uphill Calling

Observers and participants in this new situation embrace four or five different perspectives, and/or agendas, to explain and predict the future of clergy women: First, there are those who think that the increasing numbers of clergy women will force the church and the powers that have historically controlled the churches, to change and become more egalitarian. They argue that the numbers alone will overwhelm the situation and bring about true leadership equality in contemporary Protestantism. They quote scripture and insist that in Christ Jesus there is no longer male nor female and they await a new day. Unfortunately, there is no evidence from studies of occupational change that sheer numbers of female clergy correct inequities and overwhelm past assumptions, or that the promise of the scriptures is any nearer to fulfillment than it was 2,000 years ago.

Second, there are those who look at the growing numbers of women in ordained ministry and predict a reactionary backlash. They associate clergy women with the liberal modern agenda, and they see Protestant strength moving away from mainline liberal religion. Fundamentalist and conservative Christian bodies are growing and in many of those communities clergy women are not welcome. There is a growing pessimism about the capacity of the churches to embrace the leadership of women in truly equitable ways. Male clergy, they note, will not relinquish power easily; and clergy women, even if they are ordained, will eventually be co-opted and limited by hierarchical traditions deeply embedded in the history of ordained ministry. This analysis says that things are going to get worse before they get better.

Third, there are those who recognize that although clergy women seem to be "taking over" the ordained ministry within mainline Protestantism, it will be a hollow victory. By the time substantial numbers of women gain access to ordained ministry, the occupation will have lost its prestige (if it hasn't already) and women will find themselves in a devalued vocation keeping dying denominational systems afloat. This is what has happened in other recently feminized secular occupations, and it will happen to clergy women.

Fourth, there are those who applaud the ways in which women have made great "advances" in religious leadership but suggest extreme caution. Change is exceedingly complex. Without a major retooling and rethinking of the assumptions and symbols surrounding ordained ministry, ecclesiastical cultures will continue to track women into second class leadership options. Women dare not be naive and overly optimistic about what it takes to redeem entrenched habits from the past.

Finally, fifth, it is possible to agree with this sobering and realistic judgment but insist that the glass is half full rather than half empty. Looking closely at the wonderful ministries of clergy women during the past 25 years, we submit that women are expanding expectations and definitions of religious leadership for the whole church.

Although parish ministry will continue to be an important leadership pattern at the center of Christian understandings of church and society, in the future fewer local clergy will be full-time, life-time paid pastors. The careers of clergy women already point to a day when more clergy will work in church-related ministries outside the parish, or for several congregations--when clergy will move in and out of secular employment, blurring historical distinctions between clergy and laity--when clergy will be authorized by and accountable to several ecclesiastical bodies--when clergy may be paid for work done in secular institutions, yet be empowered to do that work as an agent of the Christian church. Clergy will live between their commitment to the church and to the world, insisting that both commitments be called and recognized as "ministry."

The experience and sense of calling among clergy women in the 1990s shows that clergy women are not merely survivors, nor are they breaking down old barriers simply to get into a vocation shaped and still dominated by male perspectives. Rather, clergy women are reinventing ministry for the future, refusing the old definitions and expectations. Clergy women are expanding the very essence of Christian ministry and guiding the whole church to rethink and renew its leadership and membership.

Appendix 1

Changing Numbers of Clergy in Major Protestant Denominations*

	1977 Women	1977 Men	1986 Women	1986 Men	1994 Women	1994 Men
American Baptist Churches	157	5,163	429	3,676	712	5,046
Assemblies of God	1,572	12,356	1,588	15,667	1,574	16,996
Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)	388	3,712	743	3,328	988	4,481
Church of God (Anderson, IN)	272		275		296	2,659
Church of the Brethren	27	797	120	1,988	142	1,021
Church of the Nazarene	426		355		377	3,036
Episcopal Church	94	12,099	796	13,009	1,394	9,920
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America	73		790		1,519	11,706
Free Methodist Church	11		69		24	1,854
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) ¹	350	13,555	1,524	18,084	2,705	11,873

Southern Baptist Convention					1,130	34,000
Unitarian-Universalist Association	39	571	81	723	376	860
United Church of Christ	400	4,746	1,460	3,649	1,843	5,454
United Methodist Church	319	19,916	1,891	18,991	3,003	17,614
Wesleyan Church	384		255		238	1,952

*Blanks indicate that statistical information is not available.

Appendix 2

Percentage of Clergy Women in Major Protestant Denominations (1994)

American Baptist Churches	12%
Assemblies of God	8%
Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)	18%
Church of God (Anderson, IN)	10%
Church of the Brethren	12%
Church of the Nazarene	11%
Episcopal Church	12%
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America	11%
Free Methodist Church	1%
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)	19%
Southern Baptist Convention	4%
Unitarian-Universalist Association	30%
United Church of Christ	25%
United Methodist Church	15%
Wesleyan Church	11%