

Heather Olson
Gender, Theology, and Ministry
Dr. Fulkerson
May 7, 2010

Out of the Pew and into the Pulpit: Empowering Women Clergy to Proclaim the Gospel in the
21st Century

Since the 1950s, women have made significant strides toward gender equality in the workplace. However, they often encounter greater resistance when entering into leadership roles, both in becoming a leader in the first place as well as in leading itself. Women have met even greater opposition when leading in the church. While early Methodism allowed women to preach, lead classes and bands, visit the sick, teach Sunday school, and lead prayer, female leadership was discouraged when the denomination became more popular in the early 1800s and entered the mainstream of American society. The General Conference of 1880 went so far as to refuse women licensure as a local preacher. This decision was overturned in 1920, the same year that the United States ratified the nineteenth amendment on women's suffrage. In 1924, women were allowed to become local elders. A key influence in the granting of those two rights, local preacher licensure and local eldership, was Dr. Georgia Harkness, the first woman appointed (as a local elder) to teach at a Methodist seminary in 1940. She and many others repeatedly petitioned General Conference for full elder rights and privileges beginning in 1924. In 1956, they finally succeeded and Maud Jensen was the first woman ordained as an elder in full connection. Change proceeded gradually. It was not until the 1970s that women began entering United Methodist seminaries in significant numbers and even then, they still met many barriers and people who tried to dissuade them. Female clergy in all denominations need support and encouragement from their surrounding environment as well as knowledge of what to expect in order to be empowered to effectively proclaim the Gospel.

Pastors come from the laity in the church. Currently, in The United Methodist Church, women make fifty-eight percent of the membership.¹ Given the tendency for more women than men to attend church, this number is hardly astonishing. In fact, the surprise is that it is not higher! This figure roughly corresponds to who the local church calls sets apart for ordained ministry and who attends seminary. Enrollment at theological schools across the U.S. is approximately half female and half male, just like the U.S. population.² However, 50% of churches are not pastored by a woman, which begs the question, “What happened between seminary and ordination?” In fact, in The United Methodist Church, only nineteen percent of ordained elders are women.³ The North Carolina Annual Conference is about the same with twenty percent of elders who are female.⁴ United Methodist elders are ordained to word (preaching), order (leadership), and sacrament (communion). They are itinerant and appointed to a church by a bishop. In contrast, seventy-seven percent of United Methodist deacons are women.⁵ This number is slightly lower in the North Carolina Annual Conference at sixty-seven percent. Deacons’ orders are for word and service and they must find their own placement. Prior to 1996, elders were ordained deacons before becoming elders. That pattern comes from the Anglican Church where the diaconship is a step on the way to the elder’s order. In The United Methodist Church, both elders and deacons can baptize and marry. However, deacons can only celebrate the Eucharist if there are no elders available to do so. That more women enter the diaconate than become elder is a disturbing statistic. Moreover, elders are not superior to or leaders over deacons except in the case of senior pastors with a large church staff and those

¹ Craig This and Elaine Moy, “Most Conference Committee Chairpersons are Men,” *The Flyer*, vol. 39:1 (Jan-Mar 2008): 10.

² General Commission on the Status and Role of Women, The United Methodist Church, <http://www.gcsrw.org/UMCclergyin2008vsUMCclergyin2003.aspx>

³ <http://www.gcsrw.org/Research.aspx>

⁴ The North Carolina Annual Conference statistics I computed myself after receiving the data from the conference archivist.

⁵ <http://www.gcsrw.org/Research.aspx>

elders who are District Superintendents or Bishops. Why so many women become deacons is an issue that may need further exploration.

In terms of leadership and hierarchy in The United Methodist Church, each church is part of a district, a small geographic area encompassing many local churches. Each district is headed by a District Superintendent who is an elder set apart from parish ministry for four years.

Margaret Henrichsen was the first female elder appointed District Superintendent in 1967. At present, twenty-seven percent of District Superintendents are women.⁶ In the North Carolina Conference, eight percent of District Superintendents are female.⁷ Many districts make up an Annual Conference, which often correlates with state lines. Each conference is overseen by a Bishop, also an elder set apart for a four year term. Bishops never lead their home conference but are appointed to another one. The first woman bishop, Marjorie Matthews, was elected by her Annual Conference in 1980.⁸ She served the Wisconsin Annual Conference before retiring.

Seventeen percent of all elected Bishops, both retired and active, are women.⁹ However, reflecting the trend toward more female Bishops, twenty-seven percent of Bishops currently serving in the United States, are women.¹⁰ The area still to be greatly affected by women clergy is in the leadership of large churches with congregations of one thousand members or more.

Only seven percent of United Methodist churches of this size are headed by a female senior pastor.¹¹ If size is representative of and a reward for ministerial success like it is in the secular world, then women are not succeeding. Women's leadership is being contested at this level not only by the denomination but by laity as well. My own grandmother, a lifelong Methodist,

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ <http://nccumc.org/districts/>

⁸ Council of Bishops, The United Methodist Church, <http://bishops.umc.org/interior.asp?mid=5860&ptid=21>

⁹ <http://www.gcsrw.org/Research.aspx>

¹⁰ <http://bishops.umc.org/interior.asp?mid=5860&ptid=21>

¹¹ <http://www.gcsrw.org/Research.aspx>

encouraged me in my seminary work but believed that in churches with multiple clergy the senior pastor should be a man. I pray that her opinion reflects more her generation than United Methodists as a whole because then this situation will gradually change due to natural turnover.

One place to begin to overcome this imbalance is with intentionality. For example, fifty percent of the Methodist churches in El Salvador are pastored by women. The oldest of the ten churches dates to 1994 and five out of the ten congregations have women pastors. This ratio is not because Salvadorans are less sexist than their fellow Latinos. Instead, the President of the Methodist Church in El Salvador, Juan de Dios Peña, intentionally empowers women to become pastors. He is the third President of the Salvadoran Methodist Church. The first president was also male. However, the second president was a woman. Many of the male pastors could not tolerate having a woman in authority and they drove her to leave office before the end of her four-year term. In response, Juan de Dios deliberately encourages lay women active in their congregations to pastor new church plants. An eleventh congregation is about to begin and its pastor will be female. All but one of the sexist male pastors has left because of Juan de Dios's intentionality and the Methodist Church of El Salvador is healthier because of it.

It takes more than intentional appointments for women pastors to be empowered as leaders in the church. To begin with, many Methodist clergywomen do not know about Dr. Georgia Harkness, Maud Jensen, Margaret Henrichsen, and Marjorie Matthews, as well as many others. United Methodist clergywomen tend to feel as if they are the first females to tread this path because there are still so many appointments who have never received a woman pastor. To an extent, history has been rewritten because it is hard to find out about women who have gone before. Methodist women preachers from before the twentieth century, such as Phoebe Palmer, Amanda Berry Smith, Helenor Davis, Anna Howard Shaw, Anna Oliver, Margaret Van Cott,

Francis Willard, and so many more, get forgotten because the contributions they made were undone by the General Conference of 1880 and then largely forgotten in Methodist history. Women in Methodism get relegated to a special lecture in seminary courses. Students are required to know many male missionaries specifically but then can choose any one woman to study in mission and evangelism classes. The result is that recent Methodist seminary graduates know very little about previous clergywomen because it seems that knowledge is unimportant.

The alternative to feeling like the first female clergy pioneer is expecting the path to be already forged and forgetting how recently it was done and that it had to be done. Women who have entered fulltime ordained ministry since the 1990s tend to expect full acceptance immediately.¹² They are not prepared for the discrimination which they will experience at some point in their ministry. Thus, when these clergywomen encounter prejudice and discrimination, they believe it is caused by their own personal failure and rarely recognize it as sexism.¹³ They internalize the problem and believe the fault lies with them. A related problem area is clergywomen's propensity to base their feelings of satisfaction, self-worth, and motivation to remain in the ministry on the laity's response to their work.¹⁴ Satisfaction, self-worth, and motivation must come from other factors, such as one's calling to the ministry and relationship with Jesus Christ. Too often, what these ladies believe is their own failure causes them to leave ministry. When they leave the system, they become marginalized and unable to effect change.¹⁵ Transformation can only happen from inside the structure. In contrast, the ladies who entered seminary in the 1960s and 1970s interpreted setbacks as systemic resistance rather than personal

¹² Edward C. Lehman, Jr., "Women's Path into Ministry: Six Major Studies," *Pulpit & Pew Research Reports* (Fall 2002), 9.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 24.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 34.

failure.¹⁶ They anticipated that they would encounter opposition because of their gender and they knew it would not be their fault but a problem within the church hierarchy. Naming and calling out sexism when encountering it depersonalizes the issue, enables change and empowers clergywomen.

Society as a whole has made great advances in women empowerment but these do not all correspond to church leadership. To expect the church to act as society does is unrealistic and naïve. Equal employment opportunity and affirmative action laws do not affect the church because of the separation of church and state.¹⁷ Churches are not bound to follow these hiring practices. In addition, while some seminaries and liberal congregations are careful to use gender neutral language for God, most local churches and their parishioners do not. Historically God has been ascribed the male gender and many Christians in most denominations continue that practice. The Church is not called to be like the world, but there are a handful of worldly practices that the Church would do well to incorporate.

One subtle way in which women are unknowingly disempowered is through the use of tracks. In this case, women are allowed into ministry but side-tracked away from leadership roles. Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky call this method of attacking leadership a diversion and describe it as when one is “promoted or given new, glamorous responsibilities as a way of sidetracking their agenda.”¹⁸ One’s attention is diverted by the new specialized area that rarely initially appears to be a sidetrack. Lehman believes that the recent proliferation of ordination tracks is a denominational level backlash against women entering ordained ministry.¹⁹ In order to acknowledge a woman’s vocation in the ministry but prevent her from filling a pulpit, she is

¹⁶ Ibid., 9.

¹⁷ Ibid., 14.

¹⁸ Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky, *Leadership on the Line* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2002), 39.

¹⁹ Lehman, “Women’s Path into Ministry: Six Major Studies,” *Pulpit & Pew Research Reports*, 34.

sidetracked into education, discipleship, or some other nurturing area where her leadership reach is reduced. Such “tracks tend to pressure women into lower level positions and keep women from becoming a serious threat intellectually or occupationally to predominantly male parish ministers.”²⁰ Education ministers and similar positions do not earn as much nor carry as much prestige as senior pastors. Moreover, in The United Methodist Church, these roles are often filled by deacons, rather than elders, which limits one’s upward mobility in terms of leadership: deacons cannot become District Superintendents or Bishops. Finally, being tracked into a specialty can cause marginalization. When one person embodies a specific role and acts as a token in that role, then the whole church never has to take on the role and that person may be kept from influencing decisions outside of the role and even devalued within the role.²¹ Many pastors may be called into a certain track. However, those who enter them must be careful that the track does not lead to their marginalization nor divert them.

Additional strategies to empowering female pastors include methods of working within the system. Lehman advises not merely coping with structural sexism but maneuvering within it to get the desired outcome.²² Identification of the problem is simply the first step toward its solution; it is not a predictor of success. Instead, clergywomen who use the system for the placement process, even though it may be biased, are more likely to succeed as pastors. Receiving a more prestigious first placement, i.e., in a growing, larger church, usually only happens if one uses the system.²³ First placements are indicators of future placements in terms of increased prominence in the system and more opportunities for leadership. Leadership and prominence are often accompanied by a higher salary. Demographically, clergywomen earn

²⁰ Ibid., 12.

²¹ Heifetz and Linsky, *Leadership on the Line*, 32, 36.

²² Lehman, “Women’s Path into Ministry: Six Major Studies,” *Pulpit & Pew Research Reports*, 19.

²³ Ibid., 17

more than their colleagues if they hold a Masters of Divinity from a major university, are between 45 and 55 years old, have several years of experience in ministry, and are the senior pastor of a large church.²⁴ Female United Methodist pastors have little influence in becoming a senior pastor or over their age, but they can choose wisely their seminary and remember to have a little patience. Another means of empowerment is having effective advocates within the system.²⁵ These persons are familiar with the system. They can explain its workings to newcomers. The United Methodist Church assigns mentors to all of its ministerial candidates. If this person is an ineffective advocate, then there are others one may turn to, such as the pastor of one's home church or a seminary professor. In addition, the support of one's District Superintendent is essential. However, other mentors and encouragers should come from outside the church as well.

Finally, adequate and effective self-care is vital to the empowerment of female clergy. Maintaining boundaries between the church and home is of utmost importance.²⁶ All clergy should have a life away from the church. Single pastors have an especially hard time achieving this distance. In particular, single female pastors "have no set of family demands to refer to when seeking to maintain a private life."²⁷ As a result, they find this boundary much more difficult to sustain. Another difference between unmarried clergymen and unmarried clergywomen is the ease of dating.²⁸ More men are intimidated by ordained women than women are of ordained men. Crucial to maintaining boundaries and having a social life is having support from a group of friends who encourage the pastor to keep a healthy distance from the church. These friends come into play again when dealing with loneliness. In general, clergy

²⁴ Ibid., 16.

²⁵ Ibid., 20.

²⁶ Ibid., 22.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., 23.

often feel lonely. However, women pastors are far more likely to feel lonely and isolated because they are more closely observed and scrutinized than their male counterparts.²⁹ Clergywomen may have to prove their effectiveness in situations where clergymen do not. Society examines women on the whole with a greater care than it pays toward men: their dress, shoes, handbag, hair style, hair color, nails, etc. Therefore, in anticipation of loneliness and to help keep a healthy emotional distance from the church, women pastors should have a support group of some kind to see them through all the hardships that may arise.

In conclusion, anticipating sexism, staying within the system, and having a supportive group of friends are the best ways to empower women entering ordained ministry. Gender equality is too new of a movement to expect it to have thoroughly impacted the church. Naming the prejudice in the system when encountering it but remaining in the church is critical to gradually changing the biased structure itself. Expecting loneliness but already having methods for coping with it are important for staying emotionally healthy. Many books for missionaries deal with this topic and could be easily adapted for clergywomen. The knowledge of other women who have gone before is helpful in not feeling as alone. Finally, the single most empowering activity is to trust the Holy Spirit to work and remember one's call to ordained ministry. God calls male and female pastors to a particular place and for a particular time. All pastors would do well to not let anyone or anything else cause them to forget.

²⁹ Ibid.