

Women Pastors And The United Methodist Church

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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ABSTRACT

The number of women pastors in the United Methodist Church, one of the largest Protestant denominations, is growing. This paper discusses the triumphs and challenges of United Methodist women pastors, the advantages and disadvantages of their job, their seminary experience, a general history of women United Methodist pastors, and where these women see their role changing in the future.

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STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

The advancements and struggles of women pastors in the United Methodist church is largely uncharted territory in terms of research. The major United Methodist Publishing House, Cokesbury, offers no books that focus solely on women pastors and few that focus on women in the United Methodist Church. The United Methodist Service Center, operated by the United Methodist Church's General Board of Global Ministries, (the largest agency of the United Methodist Church), provides resources for United Methodist Church women members, but provides no resources on United Methodist women pastors. This honors thesis concentrates on United Methodist women pastors and seeks to widen understanding of their role in the church today.

The body of knowledge on women pastors in the United States is nominal and on United Methodist women pastors is even smaller. There are several ecumenical books available on women pastors. At the present time at some United Methodist seminaries the number of women outnumber the number of men. Information needs to be available for women to learn about the recent heritage of United Methodist women pastors because of their increasing size, stature and role in the United Methodist Church. This thesis intends to add to the existing body of knowledge of United Methodist women pastors. Everyone from members of the United Methodist Church, to seminarians and future seminarians, to the rest of the world needs to have knowledge about United Methodist women

pastors. The lives, challenges, hopes, and visions need to be shared. This thesis poses research questions to provide information on women pastors that is desperately needed and will enable people to understand the triumphs and struggles of United Methodist women pastors.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

With the advent of the acceptance of women as pastors, several different types of literature have explored the topic of the role of the woman as pastor. This literature review spans the time period of approximately 25 years. This following literature was beneficial in giving a general background on women pastors. Unfortunately it does not focus specifically on United Methodist women pastors. One example of a more general work of women pastors is a collection of sermons by women. Women and the Word--Sermons (Crotwell, 1971) highlights some of the best of the recent sermons by women today. Another general piece of literature on women pastors is from the World Council of Churches conference. In Ordination of Women in Ecumenical Perspective (Parvey, 1980) the ordination of women as pastors is discussed. This book explores the different views Christian denominations have of women pastors. Other literature of women pastors includes a study series by Lyle Schaller entitled Women as Pastors

(Schaller, 1982) for those interested in studying the topic. There has also been literature that considers women as pastors in the larger picture, namely The Woman in the Pulpit (Noren, 1991) and Women Pastors (Schaller, 1982).

Focusing specifically on the United Methodist Church, there is some literature about and for Methodist women leaders but much less concerning United Methodist women pastors. Examples of literature for United Methodist women from the Cokesbury publishing house includes the book Leading Women: How Church Women Can Avoid Leadership Traps and Negotiate the Gender Maze (Becker, 1995) and The Women's Bible Commentary (Newsom and Ringe). Cokesbury does not provide any one book on the subject of the United Methodist women pastor.

One of the books offered by Cokesbury, She Offered Them Christ (Chilcote, 1993) does not focus on women pastors per se, but rather on the legacy of women preachers in the early Methodist movement in England. It discusses Methodism's founder John Wesley's change from non-acceptance to acceptance of women preachers in the ministry. Upon Wesley's death, however, women preachers were silenced by the new leaders of the Methodism. But women were obvious as pioneers in the expansion and establishment of Methodism (Chilcote, 26) Several historical key women paved the way for the future of United Methodist women pastors and therefore knowing about them is important in examining the United Methodist women pastor today.

Spirituality And Social Responsibility (Skinner Keller, 1993) written by Rosemary Skinner Keller discusses United Methodist women's vocational visions.

The book speaks of women lay leaders, pastors and bishops, but the book's focus is not on pastors, but rather on women in the United Methodist church in general. In her book Skinner Keller discusses how United Methodist women clergy are part of an extremely diverse community. She emphasizes how United Methodist women clergy are diverse "racially, ethnically, internationally, politically, theologically, culturally, physically, spiritually" and "we celebrate and struggle with our differences." (Skinner Keller, 1993, p. 297)

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following research questions were addressed during the research process. The questions were broad rather than specific in nature because of the scarcity of research and literature on the topic. The questions were basic in order to provide general background and information on women United Methodist pastors.

1. What challenges have United Methodist women encountered in a.) seminary, in b.) the process of ordination and c.) as an ordained pastor?
2. What is it like to be a woman pastor in the United Methodist Church today?
3. What is the future of the United Methodist woman pastor?

METHODOLOGY

As the second largest Protestant denomination in the United States (Corbett, 54) the United Methodist Church has considerable influence and expanse. Overall there are 5,322 female clergy and 26,656 male clergy in the United Methodist Church. The surveying of women pastors was centered on the Indiana and Illinois area of the United Methodist church because these are the two states where the thesis author resides. As a pretest, a survey was sent out to two United Methodist women pastors to test its effectiveness. After receiving convincing results of the survey's viability, the same survey was sent out to a small yet manageable sample size of eight United Methodist women pastors. This number was small enough to handle the results appropriately, yet large enough to receive quality responses. Of the eight surveys sent out, six were received and were evaluated in this paper.

A copy of the survey is in Appendix B. Basic information and demographic information was asked at the beginning and end of the survey, including name, church, date of birth, job title, city and state of church, marital status, children and their ages, seminary attended, and date of ordination. Questions about their past included how the respondent came to her decision to be a pastor, initial challenges and rewards when she first entered the ministry, and challenges or achievements in seminary (Seminary is a three-year graduate program required to be an ordained pastor in the United Methodist Church.) Other questions dealt with any experiences that they had with people who told

them they shouldn't be a pastor because they are a woman, and any history they knew of United Methodist women pastors. The question that dealt with their present situation was how doing the will of God fits in with being a pastor. How they see the role of the United Methodist woman pastor changing was a question looking to the future. The written survey was two pages and respondents were asked to elaborate as much as possible and were encouraged to attach additional sheets of paper with their responses. The survey cover letter (see Appendix A) introduced the thesis author, explained the goal of this thesis, and asked the respondents to return the survey within one week of receiving it.

To get a wider scope of the role and history of the woman as pastor, secondary research was also conducted of not only United Methodist literature, but also ecumenical literature about women pastors. Other sources, such as United Methodist church members, United Methodist district superintendents, and the pastor/director of a United Methodist Wesley Foundation, were consulted for further information and to obtain a general working background of the topic.

FINDINGS

The average age of the respondents was 48 years old. All of them were pastors in the United Methodist Church in the states of Indiana and Illinois. Five out of the six women attended United Methodist seminaries. Four respondents are married, one is single, and one is divorced. Five out of the six women have children, of these children the average age is 22. Three of the women were ordained in the 1970's, one in the 1980's, and two in the 1990's.

Respondents reported two reasons they decided to become a pastor in the United Methodist church. The first involved a calling from God at an early age, one at age 12 and the other at age 16. In each case, the women were discouraged, one by their local pastor, the other by comments that "women don't do that." The woman called to the ministry at age 12 decided to begin attending seminary at age 23. The woman called to the ministry at age 16 pursued other vocations until 28 years of age when she felt called to seminary again. At this point she decided to go to seminary but to not to become a pastor.

The other path to the ministry reported by respondents was through local involvement in the church. Of the four of these women, two of them transferred from another denomination to the United Methodist Church, one from Disciples of Christ and one from the Baptist Church. One of the women cited her reason for changing denominations is that she felt the United Methodist Church was more alive spiritually, she agreed with the Wesleyan tradition, and that she felt there were more opportunities for women because of the the United Methodist Church's system of appointments (appointments are when an ordained pastor is

assigned by the bishop a local church to serve). The other woman changed denominations because the structure and organization of the United Methodist Church appealed to her. The United Methodist Church's education emphasis and financial provisions were also encouraging to her.

The other two women came into the ministry through their local involvement in church. One was working as a Director of Christian Education and sensed that God was calling her to be a pastor. She was especially challenged by this because she had been taught that the Bible did not promote women preaching. The other respondent also experienced discouragement because she grew up in a local church that did not accept women for ordination. She was involved with her church through being active in Bible studies and serving as a liturgist in worship services. Through this involvement, she was challenged to go to seminary to get more training. Early in her first semester there, she felt a call from God to the ministry as a pastor.

The respondents surveyed reported varied responses when asked about what they knew of the history of women pastors in the United Methodist Church. Two respondents cited the writings of Rosemary Skinner Keller as influential. One respondent cited Skinner Keller's writings as crucial during the time she was questioning whether or not God was calling her to be ordained. She learned through the book that other women had gone before her and laid the groundwork. Also influential in learning the history of United Methodist women pastors were United Methodist studies. Two women also discussed how they had learned through experience, and one stated she was part of the history of women

pastors because when she attended seminary in 1975, she was part of only 9% women in seminary at the time. The most recent seminary graduate of the respondents revealed that she is more familiar with the history of women pastors in the United Methodist Church than most women in general because of what she learned at seminary.

The respondents surveyed experienced both rewards and challenges when they first went into the ministry. These challenges and rewards ranged in scope. The rewards cited by the respondents focus mostly on being able to share God's love. One woman said that the greatest reward was helping people in times of crisis to see God's presence even in stressful situations. Also cited was watching people grow spiritually as God became more real and their relationship God more vital. Another respondent said how much she enjoyed and continues to enjoy the preaching and worship. The greatest reward one respondent cited was the awareness that whatever challenges came, children present on Sunday morning would grow up knowing that God calls women. Other rewards were also indicated. One woman said that her most rewarding challenge came when the United Methodist Church's Board of Ordained Ministries found that she did indeed have the gifts and graces that were worthy for specialized ministry. This affirmed her belief that God calls whom he chooses in spite of the road blocks and self-doubts. For one of the respondents one of the most rewarding aspects was seeing her daughter and some friends go into the ministry of the church.

Most of the challenges the women encountered when they first entered the ministry were solely because they were women. One respondent's mother and

brothers were against her entering the ministry because she was a woman. This respondent said that male ministers were tolerant and a few were helpful. Another respondent cited that she needed role models as preachers and teachers in order to accept that it was right in her mind. Unfortunately she said most did not know how to relate to a professional woman. While in seminary, another respondent found the doubt in men preachers and pastors acute. Male seminary students would often challenge her with the question, "Are you called to preach?" in questioning tones. Two women cited their own fears of keeping up with the job. One respondent said a challenge for her is being able to balance all the various demands. One woman said that one of her challenges was her own insecurities about her role as a pastor. She also cited sexism in her local church as a challenge. One respondent mentioned that one of her challenges was moving over 100 miles from home. Her biggest challenge though was finding friends that she could share her joys and sorrows with. Fortunately, a local Baptist woman pastor was able to provide support. Another challenge she said was that her family had to adjust to living on one-third of the income they had previously been accustomed to.

As far as being a woman pastor in the United Methodist Church today, there are advantages and disadvantages. One woman indicated that she faces the same struggles as most women professionals. She made a point to state though that she has not found much sexism in recent years. Another respondent agreed. She said that the disadvantages include an assumption that because women happen to be wives and mothers as well as pastors, they will be less committed to doing

what is needed to be successful pastors. She stated that many women pastors are workaholics and overachievers in order to prove their worth. Similarly, one woman said that since women don't fit the male stereotype, they have to discover their own way of doing ministry. Another woman mentioned her male colleague's threat level and the initial need for women to prove their call and gifts.

Two respondents stated that the situation is better now for women pastors. One respondent said that it is improved although the hierarchy of the United Methodist Church still wants to safeguard women pastors. Another said that being a women pastor in the United Methodist Church today is easier than it was for her sisters in the past because others have gone before to lay the groundwork, showing churches that women can and do serve and conduct their duties as well as men do. She also said that often churches that have had women ask for another woman when they are faced with a pastoral change. One women indicated one advantage is that she has the profound blessing of the knowledge that she is doing what she was born to do. Another advantage for her is pride and excitement in acceptance and affirmation of her fellow women's ministry. Similarly, another woman said that the affirmation received from women in the congregation is the greatest testimony that it is an advantage to be a woman pastor. For her, being a women pastor in the United Methodist Church today is the greatest and most rewarding things she's ever done in her entire life. Also mentioned as a positive aspect was high visibility in the church, but it was stated that this could also be a disadvantage because it is difficult to work with the men's group and it is hard

not to try to do everything.

The women surveyed mentioned struggles they had in becoming ordained as a deacon and as an elder of the United Methodist Church. In order to be ordained as a deacon in the United Methodist Church, one must be a certified candidate for ministry for two years (to be a certified candidate one must complete a United Methodist workbook and take several tests). Also necessary to be ordained as a deacon is two years in service ministry, a bachelor's degree, and a master's in specialized ministry. A doctrinal examination is necessary and an interview and recommendation of the district committee and the conference board is also required. An alternative education route to ordination as a deacon is to be 35 years old, be a certified candidate for two years, have a bachelor's degree, hold a certification or license in area of service with a minimum of eight graduate hours, and have 24 hours of basic theological studies. Ordination as an elder, which is a higher distinction, requires one to have been a certified candidate for two years, hold a bachelor's degree and a master of divinity degree, and also have the doctrinal examination and interview and recommendations.

The struggles the women surveyed encountered in ordination were both within themselves and within the framework of the United Methodist Church. One woman said that the struggle rested solely on the struggle within herself. She called this self-doubt and unworthiness. She was able to get through these struggles through the grace of God and the strength of the Holy Spirit when she prayed for direction. Another respondent agreed that she had struggles within herself, and she added, also with the United Methodist Church. She had much to

discern and reconcile dealing with the issue of which denomination to be ordained in and how that would affect her family. She also questioned whether she truly had all the gifts needed. One woman struggled in the ordination process because she was denied by her conference of the United Methodist Church for ordination first as a deacon and then as an elder. But she was able to sort out the issues of identity and self-esteem through professional counseling. This respondent states that she believes that she is stronger and better able to face disappointment today in the ministry since she has not had an easy journey. One woman stated that the struggles she had during the ordination process were due to her liberal theology. The women surveyed mentioned that although they were ordained they still struggled to get church appointments. One said that being ordained was not nearly as difficult as getting a church assignment. Another woman surveyed agreed that the struggle was in receiving an appointment. Her student pastorate and first appointment were extremely low-paying. Many women ordained in her time couldn't get an appointment.

Several of the women pastors surveyed seminary experiences were positive. Two other women had positive seminary experiences, one said that at seminary she felt respected. Another respondent mentioned one of her initial challenges with seminary to be a positive experience. She was asked by the president of the seminary, "Did God call you to preach?" She answered "No. But I know I have the gift of teaching and I cannot think of a better thing than to teach the Word of God." The response of the president to this was to accept her into the seminary and underwrite her first year's tuition. This same respondent

said her experience at seminary was the best of her life. At her seminary she felt affirmed and encouraged. As a result of this, she began to conquer her self-doubt and sense of unworthiness. She says that she is where she is today because of the presence of God working within the faculty and staff at the seminary she attended. Another said that her seminary was a great environment because women faculty were brought in part-time to present adjunct classes to enable explorations of new understandings of scripture and themselves as women. Two women had mixed feelings about seminary. One said that she loved it but it could not and did not help prepare her for today's ministry. It was at seminary her call for ministry that focuses on justice and peace was crystallized. One respondent's first year at seminary was at a Catholic monastery. There she felt accepted and respected by most teachers and students. After her first year she attended a United Methodist seminary in Ohio. There she encountered some problems with the professor of preaching who thought all women "told stories" instead of preaching.

Three respondents surveyed overall had struggles with seminary. One woman said that although she did not feel discriminated against at seminary, she found handling time and family responsibilities a challenge. Since she went to seminary while she was still raising three children, she found that there were days when she did not want to go to class. She had struggles of worrying about what to do if a child got sick and she still had to go to class. She also had the struggle of commuting 75 miles one-way to seminary. One advantage to the commuting for her was the time of sharing and study with others who were commuting with

her. Another respondent said that at seminary she was the only woman in most of her classes and that the men did not understand at the time that there were women's issues to deal with. One called her seminary experience very rough until her internship under a wise veteran pastor in a large church where she saw the possibilities of local church leadership.

The role of the United Methodist woman pastor is changing in the sense that their role is growing and they are being able to take on higher leadership positions. One respondent stated that because there are many more women pastors, that helps in being accepted. In her conference there are now women district superintendents. District superintendents are leadership positions above pastors that supervise a geographical area of United Methodist churches. This respondent also said that there are now more women in larger churches as senior pastors. She said that there are still churches that won't accept women pastors, but it is changing. Another respondent agrees that United Methodist women are taking on leadership roles in the denomination as district superintendents and even as bishops, the highest ranking leadership position for United Methodist clergy. The other respondents also see the role of the United Methodist woman pastor changing. One respondent said that women who enter the ministry now don't always understand the struggles that the previous women pastors had. Two respondents focused on the spiritual gifts and skills of United Methodist women pastors. The first of these respondents said all women pastors have different gifts and skills. She stated that women are accepted as pastors much more today. She emphasized that people like her are all pastors who happen to be women, not

women who first decided to be pastors. The second respondent agreed. There is an increasing understanding that each United Methodist woman pastor has different spiritual gifts, theologies, perspectives and priorities within the United Methodist denomination, according to the second respondent. The last respondent stated that the presence of God in person regardless of the gender has empowered the role of the woman pastor in United Methodism. Women bring a depth of spirituality that is different from men according to this respondent.

Each of the respondents surveyed revealed that they had had situations where they had people not approve of them being a pastor. When asked if they justify themselves in these situations, several revealed that they do not. One respondent said that she does not justify herself; rather she just keeps on doing what she is called to do. She said that it is the problem of the person if they don't think women are called. She said that she is strong in the fact that she is called. One respondent said that the number of experiences with people who have told her that she should not be a pastor because she is a woman has greatly decreased but is still too frequent. This respondent has often encountered this at weddings or funerals which include those outside the United Methodist Church. She said that she does not justify herself other than saying that God gives spiritual gifts and skills to all to use. Three respondents said that they use women from the Bible to defend their role. One respondent uses the women mentioned in the New Testament like Priscilla who helped the apostle Paul. The other respondent deals with these situations scripturally by using the examples of the Samaritan woman of the New Testament and women who were left in charge by Paul. She said that

she also handles these situations by telling her story and ministering to these people as much as possible. The third respondent said that she tells people that God always calls men and women to work and mission. She said that she points out the women in scripture who were leaders and then she tells them that it was not her idea to do this and that it was God's and who is she to argue. The final respondent stated that no one has told her that she should not be a pastor but they have expressed their opinions about women pastors around her. She stated that confrontations will not change opinions and that what will change these opinions is for women pastors to be the scriptural light among the darkness and to be Christ-like amid demonic spirits because it is only then that the presence of God can carry out its transformation of people. She said that when one reaches the point of believing that God has called you and when one is confident they are doing the will of God, then there is not a need for justification.

When the respondents were asked how doing the will of God in their life fits in with being a pastor, overwhelmingly the response was that being a pastor is God's will for them. One respondent said this and added that is the only reason she would continue with it. Another respondent agreed that being a pastor is the will of God and that she is where she is at in life because God opened doors for her. Other respondents agree. A respondent said that being a pastor is the way she does God's will in her life and that she has no doubt that God called her into the pastorate. She follows the will of God by trying to let Christ live in her and by treating her enemies with love. For another respondent being a pastor is the will of God because God gave her the desire and the ability to teach, preach,

and lead worship. She has been affirmed from God as she goes through a week of fulfilling her responsibilities as the pastor of her church. The blessing and challenge of continually asking herself what God wants preached is the way one respondent does the will of God. The last respondent said that doing the will of God in her life is a daily thing.

SUMMARY/CONCLUSIONS

This thesis has added to the body of knowledge of United Methodist women pastors. This is knowledge that is desperately needed because of the lack of information on the topic. A number of women pastors were surveyed and responded to questions about challenges they faced as pastors in the United Methodist Church. Each, though, reported being confident in their position and being secure that God has placed them there and given them the gifts and talents needed. The respondents reported how they were led into the ministry; what they knew of the history of United Methodist women pastors; and rewards and challenges as a women pastors. These women pastors' road has not been easy. Several of the women were among those who were ordained in the 1970's. They often experienced difficulty in receiving appointments and often when received, these appointments were low-paying. Even today in the 1990's these women report they still face discrimination for being a female in their role. This thesis has added to the knowledge base of United Methodist women pastors and has provided a resource for future women pastors.

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Appendix A

Survey Cover Letter

October 2, 1996

Dear Pastor,

My name is Jen Sellers and I am a student at Ball State University. For my senior honors thesis, I am writing a 30-page paper on women pastors and the United Methodist Church. I myself am considering going to seminary to train to be a pastor. My goal is that this paper will help me learn about the career I would like to pursue.

My hope is that you can fill out this survey to the best of your knowledge and return it in the mail within one week of receiving it. Your responses will be kept confidential and will not be shared with anyone. If you have any comments or anything you'd like to add, feel free to write that on the survey.

Thanks so much for your help.

Sincerely,

Jen Sellers
Elliott Hall Box 3
Muncie, IN 47306
(317) 214-6984

Appendix B

Women Pastors And The United Methodist Church Survey

Name:

Church:

Please be as elaborate as possible in answering these questions. Feel free to attach an additional sheet of paper.

Why did you decide to become a pastor in the United Methodist Church?

Are you familiar with the history of women pastors the United Methodist Church? Explain.

What challenges did you face when you first became a pastor? What was especially rewarding?

What is it like being a woman pastor in the United Methodist Church today? What are the advantages and disadvantages of being a woman pastor?

Do you feel that you had any struggles in being accepted into seminary and becoming ordained?

What was your seminary experience like as you were continuing to discern God's call?

How do you see the role of the United Methodist woman pastor changing?

Have you had experiences with people who have told you that you shouldn't be a pastor because you are a woman? Describe. How do you handle these situations? How do you justify yourself?

How does doing the will of God in your life fit in with being a pastor?

Date of Birth:

Job title:

City and state of church:

Marital status:

Dependents (children and their ages):

Seminary attended:

When were you ordained?