

## CLERGYWOMEN STUDY: ATTITUDES TOWARDS ORDINATION

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The purpose of the research done by Hartford Seminary on ordained women during the past fifteen years is to document the dramatic shift in the gender of ordained leadership in American Protestantism and to determine, among other things, how understandings of ordination are being reshaped as more and more women become clergy.

Twelve years ago Hartford Seminary did a major national survey of clergywomen, collecting interview data from a random sample of women and men in parish ministry in nine mainline Protestant denominations. That study was funded by the Ford Foundation and published under the title *Women of the Cloth*, by Carroll, Hargrove and Lummis (Harper, 1983).

During the intervening years the numbers of clergywomen have continued to increase. In 1992, under a grant received from the Lilly Endowment, Inc. Hartford Seminary began another major study of Protestant clergy in American Protestantism. This study set out to survey ordained men and women in 17 predominately white Protestant denominations.

In order to determine which denominations should be surveyed we began with data from the research of Constant H. Jacquet, Jr., "Women Ministers in 1986 and 1977: A Ten Year View."<sup>1</sup> Jacquet had documented that the number of women ordained to full ministry in the United States had increased from 4.0% of clergy in those denominations ordaining women in 1977 to 7.9% in 1986. The definition of "full ministry" referred to "That office in your denomination 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." Jacquet's data gave us the basic numbers of women clergy in the 21 Protestant denominations that ordained women in 1986. (excluding Unitarian-Universalists)

TABLE I  
 Ordained Women and Men in the Hartford Seminary Study 1993  
 (16 denominations alphabetical)

	Women (Jacquet)	Men	Total
American Baptist Churches	227 (429)	183	410
Assemblies of God	41 (3,718)	14	55
Christian Church (Disc. of Christ)	265 (743)	204	469
Church of God (Anderson, Indiana)	67 (275)	58	125
Church of the Brethren	86 (120)	61	147
Church of the Nazarene	128 (355)	109	237
Episcopal Church	236 (796)	191	427
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America	254 (429+484)	220	474
Free Methodist Church	11 (69)	4	15
Presbyterian, U.S.A.	252 (1,519)	179	431
Reformed Church in America	5 (42)	2	7
Southern Baptist Churches	116 (n.a.)	107	223
Unitarian-Universalists	236 (n.a.)	242	478
United Church of Christ	283 (1,460)	229	512
United Methodist Church	211 (1,891)	197	408
Wesleyan Church	53 (255)	74	127
Drop outs and uncoded	10	18	28
TOTALS	2,481	2,092	4,573

Initially we sent approximately 10,000 questionnaires to a random sample of clergywomen and clergymen from 16 denominations. Over 4,500 completed and useable questionnaires were returned and coded, for a return rate of about 45%. The response from the more conservative denominations was a bit lower and the response from the more mainline denominations was a bit higher. Short and in-depth telephone interviews (248 short interviews, 124 with men and 124 with women, and 15 longer in-depth interviews) were completed with a random sample of the ordained women and men who had indicated their willingness to be interviewed. These clergy were asked to explain their answers more fully, and they were also asked to distribute questionnaires to key lay leaders in their congregations. A lay questionnaire was developed and five lay questionnaires were sent to each of the 248 pastors, asking them to pass the lay surveys out to their laity. This distribution of 1240 lay questionnaires produced a sample of 600 returned and coded lay questionnaires, a return rate of about 50%.

The goals of the entire research project were to:

- ++ help clergywomen see how their individual views compare with those of other men and women in ordained ministry;
- ++ explore the meaning of ordination in contemporary church life;
- ++ give denominational leaders up-to-date information about clergywomen in their denomination;
- ++ assess the impact of seminary on clergywomen;
- ++ inform laity about leadership issues related to women in ordained ministry;
- ++ examine how various denominational traditions are more or less supportive of clergywomen;
- ++ compare the career experiences of clergywomen with clergymen, and with women and men in other professions;
- ++ suggest how clergywomen deal with life style issues which are part of the ministerial vocation.

#### Denominational Clustering around Ordination Issues

This paper uses survey and interview data to explore only one of the concerns noted above--the meaning of ordination in contemporary church life.

We began with a hypothesis that the meaning of ordination in American Protestantism is changing as more and more women become ordained. Our hunch was that, following the historical shift from an ontological to a more functional understanding of ordination, we would see a correlation between an openness to women's ordination, and/or the numbers of ordained women and a more functional view of ordination. We sought to determine how clergywomen viewed the impact of their presence on general understandings of ordination, how clergymen responded to the fact that more women were becoming clergy, and how laity (both men and women) assessed the meaning of ordination and its relationship to their experience of ordained women. This is a first and preliminary look at the findings.

Our initial analysis of the response to several key questions about ordination indicated that gender and denomination are key variables in handling this material. This led to our decision to group responses into five denominational clusters.

Obviously, the efforts of women to become ordained in American Protestantism unfolded over several hundred years. The journey began when lay women within local congregations began to ask questions. Are women allowed to speak in church meetings? This was important because in the early 19th century there was a prohibition against women speaking in mixed groups, or "promiscuous assemblies," as they were called. Are women allowed to vote? Are women able to serve on the governing boards or councils of a congregation? Can women represent a local congregation at regional, diocesan or national meetings? In most Protestant denominations no progress was made towards the ordination of women until lay women gained considerable power and influence.

Among those churches in the "Free church" tradition--that is those with a congregational polity which vests a great deal of decision making in the local congregation and does not require regional or national approval for many actions--women fought and won battles over lay citizenship in the 18th and 19th century. And once women were accepted as lay leaders, it was only a small step, usually a rather local and functional one, to ordain a woman. In our sample there are five or six denominations which can appropriately be labeled "free church:" the Unitarians-Universalists, Congregationalists (today the United Church of Christ), Baptists (American and Southern), Church of the Brethren and Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). All of these free church denominations have been ordaining women since the 19th century, with the exception of the Southern Baptists and the Church of the Brethren. The ordination of women in these free church denominations is long practiced, local and functional.<sup>2</sup>

U-U separate

So. Bap. and Church of the Brethren = conflicted

Another major cluster of respondents to the survey are what we are calling the "ordered denominations." These denominations approach the process of ordination with high liturgical and ontological assumptions. Historically they have been slow and reluctant to ordain women and their arguments have rested in tradition and in the high value they place upon church order. When the church "sets apart by prayer and laying on of hands," it does something that is more than functional. It connects, through the concept of apostolic succession with the origins of the church. Therefore, in these denominations, regardless of whether their governance/polity is presbyterial or episcopal, they share a "high" view of ordination. In our data these are the Presbyterians, Reformed Church in America, Lutherans, United Methodists and Episcopalians.

In American church history these five denominations have wrestled long and hard with the question of women's ordination, yet all of them have finally decided to approve the practice. It is important to note, however, that they have made their decision in incremental steps. In some cases they have conferred temporary status through license. At other times they have

commissioned women as educators and missionaries, but refused to ordain-- establishing lesser (but more than ordinary lay) categories for female religious leadership--ordaining women to lay eldership, or consecrating them as deaconesses, or credentialing them as religious educators. In some of these denominations, where there was a split between northern and southern Methodists and northern and southern Presbyterians, or a split among ethnic Lutherans, they have had to overcome regional or ethnic differences. Northerners were generally more open to clergywomen, and Scandinavians (as opposed to certain groups of Germans) were more willing to accept women's leadership. With the various mid-20th century reunions among Methodists, Presbyterians and Lutherans, in all cases groups that had previously not ordained women have been stretched to approve the ordination of women within the united denominations. Some exceptions for conscience among denominational leaders has been temporarily tolerated (e.g. bishops who object to women's ordination have not been required to ordain women), but generally speaking denominational reunions have been a powerful force supporting the ordination of women.<sup>3</sup>

The ordered denominations care deeply about church order. They insist that setting apart persons for leadership by prayer and the laying on of hands is serious business, not to be taken lightly. Yet, once they have made the decision, ordered denominations live out the new order with remarkable vigor. In the ordered denominational cluster the ordination of women (giving women full status or conference membership) took place in a little over two decades: Presbyterians (northern) in 1955, Methodists (already reunited) in 1956, Presbyterians (southern) 1964, Lutherans (Scandinavians and liberal Germans) in 1970, and Episcopalians in 1976. Considering that these denominations have been ordaining women for less than a quarter of a century, the increase in the numbers of ordained women has been dramatic.

Our final cluster (504 clergy), we are calling the "holiness churches." This makes historical and contemporary sense. These four denominations (the Church of God (Anderson, IN), Church of the Nazarene, the Free Methodists, and the Wesleyan Methodists) are often lumped together with conservatives like the Southern Baptists, but their heritage is very different. The holiness churches came out of a Methodist/Wesleyan revival in England and America in the mid-19th century. They sought to reclaim the fervor and biblical grounding of early Methodism. They held to a high doctrine of the Holy Spirit, believing that in a second blessing or baptism by the Holy Spirit, God would come upon men and women alike. Quoting Peter's Pentecost sermon, they remembered the words of the prophet Joel, "In the last days ... I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy." (Acts 2:17) None of these denominations ever had any prohibition against clergywomen. From the beginning of the holiness revival in 1856 women and men were equally involved as leaders. Indeed, the leadership of popular holiness preacher Phoebe Palmer was celebrated, becoming an inspiration to early women in the movement.<sup>4</sup>

After the turn of the 20th century,

1. church order and biblical authority led to decline
2. increased professionalization of leadership
3. fundamentalization of these denominations

TABLE II  
Ordained Women and Men in the Hartford Seminary Study (1993)  
(15 denominations clustered)

	Women	Men	Total
Unitarian-Universalists	236	242	478
Free church denominations (ABC, UCC, DoC)	775	616	1391
Ordered denominations (PC-USA, RCA, UMC, ELCA, Epis.)	958	789	1747
Conflicted denominations (So. Bap., Breth.)	202	168	370
Holiness (Nazar., CoGod, Free Meth., Wesl.)	259	245	504
<b>TOTAL SAMPLE</b>	<b>2,430</b>	<b>2,060</b>	<b>4490</b>

### Understandings of Ordination

In order to examine the understandings of ordination held by the five clusters of ordained women and men in our sample we have focused upon three sections of the clergy questionnaire.

First, we have looked at the data from the questions appearing at the bottom of page six and top of page seven of the clergy questionnaire (Questions 23.a. through k. and question 24.) These questions explore various attitudes towards ordination. We have been particularly interested in three questions:

Question 23.j. "In the ideal church there will no longer be a need for ordained ministry."

Question 24 also asks pointedly if the respondents think that women are changing the meaning of ordination. Not only do we have statistical results for that question, but we have also gleaned over 700 textured comments written by clergy who wanted to explain their answers more fully.

Question A.1.g. More women should be ordained to full ministerial status in my denomination."

As we began our analysis some of our hypotheses were supported. Women are significantly more likely than men to believe that women are changing the meaning of ordination in all of the denominational clusters. There is the greatest gender gap in the conflicted denominations, where over 40% of the women think this is true and under 20% of the men agree. There is the least gender gap within the holiness denominations, where less than 10% of the clergy agree with this statement.

When women agreed with this statement, they did so for different reasons. One UCC woman from Ohio wrote, "I feel there are many seeking ordination for the wrong reasons. When asked about their 'call to ministry' some have no idea what it means! I realize this may also be true of men." A Unitarian woman from Massachusetts wrote "It is becoming more like another administrative hoop to jump through and less like a God instilled gift or recognition of extraordinary religious favor or privilege." Most women, however, felt that women were enriching the tradition of ordained ministry and that that was good. A Church of the Brethren woman from California wrote, "I think women in ministry are changing the understanding of power in relation to ordination. Rather than something conferred upon them women are using ordination as a means to claim their power and gifts and use them in service with others. I think it is a subtle shift from power over to power claimed and shared." A Disciples woman from Michigan agreed, "I believe that women see themselves as 'set in the midst' for ministry. Not set apart. I believe women affirm the importance of teaching and are wary of a definition of ministry that relies on patterns of dependency."

Many of the men disagreed by making a distinction between ministry and ordination. As one American Baptist man from Pennsylvania put it, "They may be changing the definition of ministry but not ordination." Or a Lutheran man from Ohio who said, "Individual women may add various new dimensions of pastoral 'style' but the meaning of ordination does not change." A few men, like this Wesleyan man from Idaho, rejected the very legitimacy of ordination for women. "I don't think that it is God's place for women to be in leadership positions. But they are every bit as capable of meeting ordination qualifications as men. Capability is not the issue." Another Wesleyan man from Michigan disagreed for different reasons. "The meaning of ordination has less to do with demographics and more to do with spiritual qualifications. Hence, the cure for a patriarchal church, which is what we have, is not in the raising of quotas, but in the discovery and development of more women who are already qualified." As did a UCC man from Indiana. "No generalization can be made. Some change the meaning simply because historically women were not ordained and now they are. Others seem to be re-mythologizing Christianity,

subordinating faith to the ultimate goal of legitimatizing and glorifying a femistry..."

When we correlated responses to this question about whether women are changing the meaning of ordination with the question as to whether the respondents thought that more women should be ordained in their denominations we got some very interesting results. Women, especially women in the ordered denominations, who agreed that women were changing the meaning of ordination, were more likely to agree that more women should be ordained in their denominations. Men, especially men in the conflicted denominations who agreed that women were changing the meaning of ordination, however, were more likely to disagree that more women should be ordained in their denominations. It appears that when the women see change, they want more women to be part of the change, but when the men see change (which many of them do not like), they do not want more women. Many of the individual comments supported that interpretation.

TABLE III  
Correlations between Question 24 and Question A.1.g.  
"Women are changing the meaning of ordination"  
with

"More women should be ordained to full ministerial status in my denomination."

	Totals	U-U	Free	Ordered	Conflict	Holiness
Women	+.12**	+.13ns	+.09*	+.21**	+.16ns	+.09
Men	-.09*	-.04ns	+.00ns	-.10*	-.33**	-.15*

When we looked more closely at Question A.1.8 "More women should be ordained in my denomination," not surprisingly all of the women were more likely to agree with that statement, with statistically significant differences between men and women in all of the clusters except the Unitarians, and a very weak correlation for the free church denominations. A lower percentage of U-U women agreed with that statement than did other clergywomen in their denominations. This is probably because there are more U-U clergywomen and therefore there is little need to correct an imbalance between men and women in ordained ministry in that denomination.

Following this logic and recognizing that the Unitarian-Universalists tend to have a low church more functional understanding of ordination, we anticipated that they would also be the most willing to "let go of ordination as essential to the church." Since they did not feel the need for more ordained women, maybe they would find ordination itself less and less important. Question 23.j. "In the ideal church there will no longer be a need for ordained ministry," was designed to find out if some clergy saw "ordination" eventually becoming totally obsolete or unnecessary. We



anticipated that U-U clergy would be the most likely to agree with this question and the holiness denominations would reject it.

Interestingly, almost two thirds of the U-U clergy disagreed with the statement that ordination would no longer be necessary in the ideal church. In fact the clergywomen in the conflicted denominations (Brethren and Southern Baptist) were the most willing to envision a church without ordination, even as they have the highest percentages of clergy (especially women clergy) who believe that more women should be ordained in their denominations. It is as if the women want to be ordained, as long as ordination is available to men but closed to them, but in the ideal church they are not so sure that it will be very important. Interestingly, on the ideal church and ordination question the Unitarians came closer to the holiness denominations in their conviction that ordination is essential to the church. We were surprised by this finding.

TABLE V

Correlations between Question 23.k and Question A.1.g  
"In the ideal church there will no longer be a need for ordination"  
with

"More women should be ordained to full ministerial status in my denomination."

	Totals	U-U	Free	Ordered	Conflict	Holiness
Women	+.11**	+.11ns	+.11*	+.05ns	+.06ns	+.15*
Men	+.07**	+.08ns	+.06ns	+.02ns	+.28**	+.10ns

Perhaps a more interesting correlation is found by comparing responses to the ideal church question with the judgement as to whether clergy feel that women are changing the meaning of ordination. Clergywomen who want more women ordained in their denominations (which are high percentages in all the denominations with the exception of the U-U's) are slightly more likely to believe that "In the ideal church there will no longer be a need for ordained ministry" (+.11\*\*), and that "Women are changing the meaning of ordination" (+.12\*\*). While the same trend is also true for the clergymen, the correlations are not .10 or higher. In the total sample, no other opinions on the meaning and importance of ordination are significantly related to the opinions of these clergy as to whether more women should be ordained in their denomination. In the table below we see that women clergy in the U-U, free church denominations, and ordered denominations who believe that women are changing the meaning of ordination are more likely to think that in the ideal church there will no longer be a need for ordained ministry.

TABLE V  
 Correlations between Question 23.k and Question 24  
 "In the ideal church there will no longer be a need for ordination"  
 with  
 "Women are changing the meaning of ordination."

	Totals	U-U	Free	Ordered	Conflict	Holiness
Women	+.25**	+.34**	+.28**	+.21**	+.10ns	+.12ns
Men	+.07**	+.17ns	+.06ns	+.07ns	-.00ns	-.03ns

### Conclusion

In the above analysis we have focused upon three questions related to changing understandings of the meaning of ordination. First, there is the factual or action concern as to whether these clergywomen and clergymen believe that more women should be ordained in their denominations. Second, there is the perception question about whether these clergy feel that women are changing the meaning of ordination itself here and now. And third, there is the future conjecture question about how these clergy envision the importance of ordination in the ideal church.

At present our correlations with these questions by gender and denominational clusters show that all of the clergywomen, with the exception of U-U clergywomen are more concerned than the clergymen to have more women ordained in their denominations. In almost all of these questions broken out by cluster, there is a significant difference between male and female clergy. It is especially interesting to note that when male clergy disagree that more women should be ordained, some of them appear to do so because they think that there are already enough women (U-U), others cite biblical texts which prohibit such a practice, and still others resist having more ordained women in their denominations because they are fearful that they will have a hard time. Clergymen in the conflicted denominations are more likely to approve of having more women ordained if they perceive that in their denomination and region women DO have as easy a time as men in becoming ordained to full clergy status; whereas clergywomen are more likely to want more women ordained if they think that women do not have as easy a time as men in becoming ordained in their denomination. (w -.21\*, M +.29\*\*).

Clergywomen in the sample generally believe more strongly that women are changing the meaning of ordination, but they cite different types of changes (some positive and some negative). Some clergymen believe that women are changing the meaning of ordination but many of them resist that claim.

As for the ideal church, there is a tenacious commitment to the importance of ordained ministry in the future church. The free church cluster clergywomen and clergymen, and clergywomen in the conflicted denominations, are the most open to an ideal church without ordination, even as they are the most zealous to get more ordained women into the church now.