

# No Joke! Resisting the “Culture of Disbelief” That Keeps Clergy Women Pushing Uphill

*By Eileen R. Campbell-Reed*

*Women called to ministry are surrounded by a “culture of disbelief” in America. Their pathways to ordination and service remain an uphill climb. Nevertheless, more and more women are entering ministry, in some denominations tripling the numbers in the last two decades. That growth is documented here for the first time. Curiously women’s overall seminary enrollment remains at the same level as twenty years ago. A closer look reveals that more women of color and fewer white women are enrolling in seminary. Despite overall growth, the culture of disbelief does not evaporate for women with an MDiv, ordination, or even a job as pastor. To resist the culture of disbelief and reduce the load women carry uphill in ministry, churches and seminaries can commit to three vital steps: 1) educate everyone about implicit gender bias; 2) create supportive workspaces, and 3) focus on ministry purpose, not image perception.*

## *Early one Sunday*

morning last November I stepped into the large open foyer of a progressive Baptist church in Kentucky. The staff check-in had just ended. My robe was hanging in another minister’s office. I wanted a quick glance through my sermon manuscript.

Making my way across the bright room, I spotted an elderly wizened man in a dark suit. He was standing sentinel at a large table piled with blankets. I circled the table and put my hand into his gnarled one, introducing myself by name.

He told me his name as we shook firmly.

“Are you the Preacher Girl?”

I might have sputtered a little.

“Well. Hum. That sounds like a super-hero to me....? And I am definitely *not* a super hero! But I am your preacher today,” I managed with a smile, leaning

into the humor of it and keeping a grip on my ire.

“I might need to see your credentials,” he said slowly.

Was he smiling? I could not tell.

“I left them at home. I suppose you’ll just have to listen to my sermon today and decide for yourself.” I delivered all of this with as big a grin as I could muster.

He chuckled. I had won. But it was close.

Twenty years ago I had regular Sunday morning banter like this when I was a full-time minister in a Georgia congregation. The old men in that small town church were like a bunch of bonus grandfathers, sharing weekly meals, running jokes, road trips, and work together on Habitat builds.

Yet, somehow it still shocks me 20 years on that the sexist jokes linger. Surely two decades of me aging should discourage folks from *calling me a girl*,

right? Surely being the visiting preacher for an event called “Journey for Justice” focused on women’s leadership in the church, would ward off sexist jokes?

But very little has changed. Of course banter is part of being a pastoral leader and often a fun part. But talking down to women and making jokes are also ways that white male power is maintained and propped up. It is hard to disrupt a power play – much less the culture of disbelief – when everyone is chuckling.

After five years of pastoral work I left my small town church to earn a PhD and become an ethnographer of ministry. As I study pastoral leadership today, I am still driven by questions like: *How do women thrive in ministry vocations that are still undermined or treated as a joke in so many parts of the church?*

## Is That Still a Thing?

“But women have come so far in 20 years, do we still have to talk about *women in ministry* in 2018!” I hear this question frequently from friends who consider themselves supporters of clergywomen. They wonder aloud about other pressing and long-neglected concerns like welcoming LGBTQI+ folks into church leadership or working on racial justice.

Yet the news cycle since that Sunday I preached in Kentucky, has been full of moments that capture the dual reality that women’s pastoral leadership is growing, *and* women still face both jokes and more insidious backlash from working in a *culture of disbelief*.

For example when Rev. Heather Larson was named one of two co-pastors to succeed Willow Creek’s founding pastor, Bill Hybels, the Evangelical world gawked and bristled. The usual accusations of degrading the Bible, giving in to political correctness, and being unfaithful to God filled the blogosphere.

A few Evangelicals like Rev. Tara Beth Leach, first female senior pastor at First Church of the Nazarene in Pasadena, California, expressed hope that Willow Creek’s choice might have a more positive “ripple effect across all of evangelicalism.”

In early 2018, popular Evangelical teacher, John Piper reasserted his view that women should not only avoid the pastorate, but they should also be barred from becoming seminary professors. In March, Piper blamed egalitarianism as a root cause of the fall of powerful men in the wake of the #MeToo movement. The movement is uncovering abuse and harassment in many churches and denominations, including recent accusations against Hybels, who took his retirement six months early. Predictable reactions emerged supporting and opposing Piper, Hybels, and other Evangelical leaders.

“But those are Evangelical churches,” you say. “Women face much greater resistance to leading there,” you add. All true. And for good measure you tack on: “We ordain and call women! And we are not like Evangelicals!”

These protests thinly veil the pervasive influence of the culture of disbelief inside progressive Christianity. In the first place, Mainline and progressive churches make up a clear minority of America’s religions (less than 15% of Christians), and thus progressives are surrounded by the disbelieving culture. Women’s progress inside Mainline churches is easily misinterpreted as culturally normative and misread as widespread. The root problem of sexism (not egalitarian values) remains everywhere in the religious landscape, including *inside* progressive churches.

When progressive Christians tell Preacher Girl jokes or protest with “Not us!” the deeper problems of sexism and social inequity for women remain

unexamined. To be sure sexism is deeply entangled with racism, homophobia and many other injustices. No injustice can be addressed in isolation. But progressives do not have the luxury of working on racism or homophobia, as if sexism were done and over.

Evangelical and Mainline church differences aside, the number of women coming forward in 2017 and 2018 to say #MeToo puts into the public eye the avalanche of harassment and abuse women face both in the church and sanctioned by the church. Just because women are ordained and hired does not mean they are fully welcomed or freed from sexism in the church.

So yes, *it is still a thing*.

## Women’s Leadership Triples

The last major multi-denominational studies of women’s church leadership appeared in 1998 and 2001. That leaves a large gap in knowledge and understanding of women’s pastoral leadership in the two decades since. In 1998 Barbara Brown Zikmund, Adair T. Lummis and Patricia Mei Yin Chang published a landmark study on women in seminary and ministry. *Clergy Women: An Uphill Calling* drew together data from predominantly white denominations and reported on attitudes about women

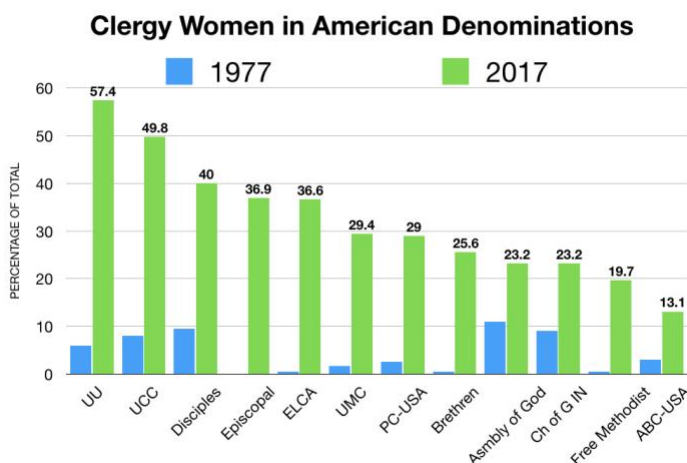
leading the church.

In 2001 Delores Carpenter published *A Time for Honor: A Portrait of African American Clergywomen*. Carpenter’s book offered the first comprehensive look at women’s leadership in historic Black churches. Due to challenges in procuring statistics for women’s church leadership, Carpenter looked to seminary graduates to get a clearer picture of women’s ministry in Black churches. In her survey of seminary graduates, she found a majority of Black women in the first wave of graduates went to work in predominantly white churches: United Methodist, American Baptist, and Presbyterian USA.

In 1977 most Mainline churches were still led by men (see fig. 1). The only denomination where women exceeded 10% of the fully credentialed clergy was the Assemblies of God. However, both Zikmund et. al. and Carpenter reported impressive growth of women’s pastoral leadership between 1977 and 1997.

To learn where women stood in 2017, my research assistant Sarah Reddish and I spent the last year working through Zikmund et. al.’s data to update and extend it. Like Carpenter, we also labored to find definitive statistics for Black women’s ordination and pastoral leadership. Most of the available data about women of color comes from the Association of Theological Schools (ATS) in the U.S. and Canada (see below).

In many predominantly white denominations the number of clergywomen has doubled or tripled since 1997. Between 1977 and 2017 ordained women in most Mainline denominations jumped from below 10% to between 20% and 40% of the fully credentialed clergy. American Baptists are on the low end at 13%. The United Churches of Christ, as well as Unitarian Universalists have reached a saturation point with overall numbers of clergywomen



equalizing (50%) or surpassing the numbers of clergymen.

In historically Black denominations, many women have to push even harder uphill as they follow God's call into ministry. For example in Black Baptist churches women are 50-75% of church members, but less than 10% of church leadership and about 1% of pastors. However, in contrast, African Methodist Episcopal (AME) churches first ordained women as elders in 1960. In 2016 they identified over 4,000 female clergy with more than 1,100 women in pastoral leadership. Since 2000 the AME have elected four women to the office of Bishop.

In most denominations the numbers and percentages of ordained women are significantly higher than the numbers and percentages of women in the role of lead pastor (see fig. 2). Barna's 2017 State of Pastors report estimates that about 9% of the pastors in the U.S. are women. In 2016 women reached a substantial enough number of total clergy (15%) for the U.S. Bureau of Labor to account for their pay in comparison with clergymen: 87 cents on the dollar, which is down from the 91 cents reported by Zikmund, et. al. in 1998.

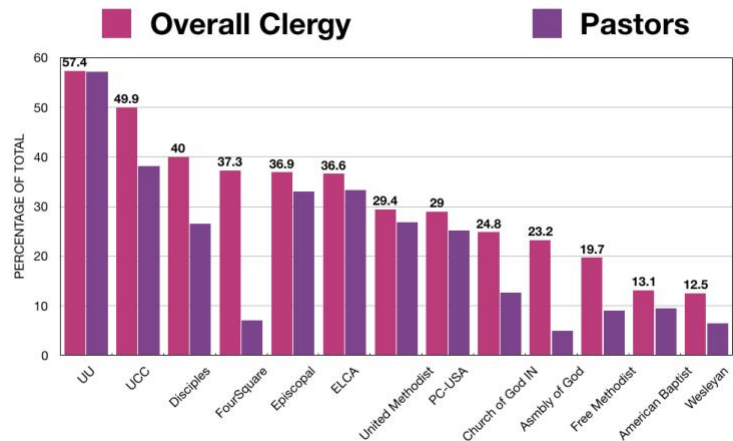
## Seminary Enrollment and Leadership

Parallel to the growth of women's leadership in Mainline churches, women's presence as students, faculty and administrators in Mainline seminaries also grew dramatically starting in the early 1970s.

The ATS began reporting data about gender in 1972 when women were less than 5 in every 100 Master of Divinity (MDiv) students, and only 10% of overall seminary enrollments.

In the next 25 years, the numbers shot up. By 1998, 30 of every 100 MDiv students in the U.S. and Canada, and 33 out of 100 students in all seminary

**Women's Pastoral Leadership by Denomination**



programs were women.

Women's enrollment in Mainline schools accelerated even more dramatically and by 1998 had approached the equalizing point with men's enrollment. From the late 1990s to the present, women in the largest Mainline seminaries have remained nearly half of the overall student population (44-49%) and half or more of the students enrolled in MDiv programs (46-52%).

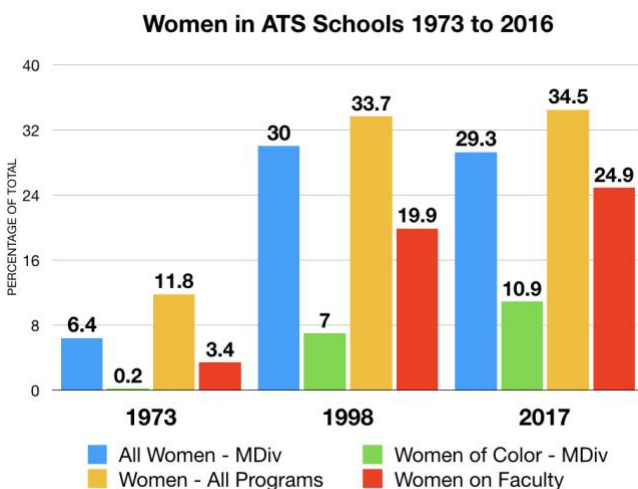
Another significant change for women's enrollment in MDiv programs since the early 1970s, comes into focus when we consider ethnicity. ATS reports that the numbers of Black, Asian, Hispanic, Native American and Multi-Racial women enrolled in MDiv programs, rose from less than 1% in 1973 to 7% in 1998 and to over 10% in 2016.

Meanwhile between 1998 and 2017 the number of white women declined significantly: from 21% to 14% of all MDiv students. Dropping faster after the economic downturn of 2008, the number of white women enrolled in MDiv programs has declined by 40% since its



peak in 2004. During the same time numbers of white men enrolled in MDiv programs dropped by 28%.

Seminary faculty women also made dramatic gains in gender equality over the last four decades, yet growth has slowed in recent years. In 1971, women made up 12% of seminary administrators, 7% of the part-time faculty, and only 3% of the full time faculty. In 1998 women made up nearly 20% of the full time



faculty. Yet in 2017 women are still less than 25% of the faculty in ATS schools.

By looking more closely at women’s enrollment in Evangelical and Roman Catholic seminaries since 1998, enduring differences that reinforce the culture of disbelief are reflected in the numbers. In the 10 largest Evangelical schools women are consistently 24% of the total enrollment and 16% of the MDiv enrollment. In the 10 largest Roman Catholic schools women remain at 35% of overall enrollment, but they have dropped in the last two decades from 17% of the MDiv students to just 10%, dipping as low as 8% in 2015-16.

## Climbing Uphill in a Culture of Disbelief

In spite of women’s growth in Mainline church leadership and seminary

enrollment, many personal and professional hurdles continue to clutter their pathway into ministry. In particular women face four obstacles that may sound low-impact or run-of-the-mill, yet they can be very corrosive for leadership, undermining the wellbeing of ministers *and* the people and churches they serve.

First, many churches still treat women as **novelties** rather than as ministers learning a spiritual and professional practice. Particularly for a new female pastor, the controversy that her hire stirs up can drain her of energy she needs to spend getting to know her congregation and receiving meaningful feedback for on-the-job training.

A closely related problem is keeping women in **isolation** from supportive peers and mentors. Women are more likely to serve smaller rural and suburban churches, putting them at greater distance from other clergywomen.

Yet peers and mentors are needed for perspectives that normalize ministry and advice that supports both the mundane and critical moments arising in ministry.

One of the most visible, yet unquestioned obstacles women face is the overwhelming attention to their image and how they are perceived, rather than how they embody the purpose of their work and calling. This kind of undertow comes in an endless stream of complaints about everything from the height of one’s heels to the length of one’s sermon to the way a pastor parents her children.

Another obstacle comes when any clergywoman, including the most accomplished and effective leaders, get dismissed *because they are women*. Recently, Rev. Amy Butler, pastor of Riverside Church in New York City posted on social media, “a member of the clergy in our fine city has declined to co-

officiate a funeral with me because I am a woman. The family will have two services so he can be involved.”

When hundreds of friends and followers expressed outrage at the overt gender bias, Butler found herself “surprised” and shocked by her own sense of the event’s banality and normality.

The culture’s deep-seated values of disbelief and dismissal of women are so powerful and pervasive as to creep into even the most consummate female pastors’ lives. The male pastor’s disdain for clergywomen may be labeled as petty, but it was a grieving family who paid the cost for his harmful actions.

Together novelty, isolation, gender bias, and image perception are pillars that uphold the culture of disbelief. These and other obstacles work against women’s flourishing in ministry. And they are recalcitrant to change even while they produce chronic stress in the lives of female ministers. They need to be addressed collectively for lasting change.

## Sharing the Load and Resisting the Cultural Disbelief

Returning to my research question we can wonder: *How can women thrive in ministry vocations that are still undermined or treated as a joke in so many parts of the church?* This question is not simply for individual women. It is also crucial for churches and seminaries.

To reduce the load of bias women carry uphill in ministry and resist the culture of disbelief, churches and seminaries can commit to three vital steps: 1) educate everyone about implicit gender bias; 2) create supportive workspaces, and 3) focus on ministry purpose, not image perception.

First, educate everyone consistently and often about how implicit gender bias infects all areas of life including the church. We can only resist the powerful

culture of disbelief in women’s leadership by involving everyone intentionally in the work. Thus, helping all people in your church or seminary recognize and resist sexism in their schools, work places and extended family networks will participate in uncovering and dismantling implicit gender bias.

Over the last nine years the [Learning Pastoral Imagination \(LPI\) Project](#) has been observing and documenting how people learn the practice ministry across time. We found one of the major roadblocks for learning ministry arises when social and personal forces of injustice undermine the minister. In particular we have witnessed how steep the climb is for women and people of color. Not only gender bias but also deep biases based on race, class, sexual orientation and gender identity all need education and dismantling.

In another set of research findings focused on women in business, Herminia Ibarra, Robin Ely, and Deborah Kolb, [“Women Rising: The Unseen Barriers”](#) (2014, *Harvard Business Review*) say: “For women, the subtle gender bias that persists in organizations and in society disrupts the learning cycle at the heart of becoming a leader.” Ibarra, Ely, and Kolb also commend education for resisting implicit bias, resonating with the LPI findings.

Second, create conditions that support learning in practice, which in turn supports pastoral flourishing. In the LPI Project we identify essential components for learning the practice of ministry, including: integration of knowledge, skill and relational aspects of ministry; peer and senior mentoring with feedback loops about experience; and intentional space for reflection on learning.

Seminaries can re-evaluate curricular commitments by focusing on integration in classrooms, field education and spiritual formation for everyone.

Schools can attend to the implicit biases that harshly impact women, people of color and LGBTQIA+ folks. Teaching both skills of resistance and self-caring practices will go further in preparing ministers to flourish as they lead.

Ibarra, Ely and Kolb call the learning conditions for professional growth: “identity workspaces.” They name essential workspace components for women’s flourishing that include: room to examine expectations, space for experimenting without fear of failure, and a community of support.

Seminary is not the only learning space for ministers. Churches that embrace their role as a rich and vital learning environment will encourage experimentation and even failure that leads to learning. Churches can be the places where women focus on learning the practice of ministry in partnership with congregations.

Finally, to share the load and resist the culture of disbelief, churches and seminaries can help each woman anchor her ministry in a sense of leadership purpose rather than focusing on how she is perceived. Returning to the purpose for which one is called and the shared purpose of congregations to be the people of God or body of Christ is grounding to every pastor’s calling in partnership with her community of faith.

For women cultivating purpose is an antidote to over-focusing on appearances, wondering if she is “acting like pastor” or getting caught up with frustration over Preacher Girl jokes and the like. Ibarra, Ely and Kolb point out: “Overinvestment in one’s image diminishes the emotional and motivational resources available for larger purposes.”

Thus churches and seminaries in partnership with women can resist the culture of disbelief and level the pathway into ministry. Together they can share the load of undoing implicit biases, creating

supportive workspaces, and focusing on ministry purpose.

It is certainly no joke that the world needs, not super-heroes, but well-prepared and well-purposed women to lead ministries of justice and care, women who believe in the love and power of God to save the world.

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