

Women in Ministry in the Free Methodist Church Getting the Picture

The Call for a Study

In 1974 the General Conference of the Free Methodist Church declared in a unanimous vote that full ordination would be granted to women as well as men who were called by God into ministry. By the 1995 General Conference, many in the church were noting that, although full ordination had been open to women for 20 years, only a small number of women were serving in the ordained ministry of the church. Compared with the number of women who had in recent years moved into professions formerly dominated by men, it seemed strange that so few women had entered the Free Methodist ministry. The General Conference mandated that “denominational and women leaders together explore the barriers that continue to hinder women, and find ways of removing those barriers to release women for more effective leadership and ministry through the Free Methodist Church” (Minutes, 32nd General Conference 4th Sitting, p. 51).

A committee of Bishop Bates, Carolyn Ellis and Cathy Stonehouse was formed in the summer of 1996 to begin the mandated study. In the spring of 1997 questionnaires were sent to all women in the ordination track of the Free Methodist Church in the United States. This paper reports the findings of that study and identifies implications and recommendations.

Source of the Findings

All women from conferences in the United States who are registered as ministerial candidates, deacons, or elders received questionnaires. One hundred and forty eight questionnaires were mailed out and 81 were returned. Responses came from 25 states, 10 from California, 9 from Washington, 6 each from Indiana and New York, 5 each from Michigan and Oregon, 3 from Missouri, and one or two from 18 other states. In this sample we have responses from 54.7% of the women clergy with representation from most areas of the country.

The Findings

Education

Free Methodist women clergy are educationally well prepared for ministry. Four percent of the respondents (3 persons) have earned their doctorate, 53% (39 persons) have a master’s degree, and 30% (22 persons) a bachelor’s degree.

Marital Status

Regarding marital status, 60% are married and 40% are single (21 single, 3 widowed, and 1 divorced). Of those who are married, 44% (19) do not have children at home and 56% (25) do have children at home. One of the single persons is a single parent.

Age and Ordination Process

We looked at the ages of the women clergy by decades and by generations. Here is the break down. Those in their:

20s – 15% (11)	50s – 13% (9)	80s – 5% (4)
30s – 9% (7)	60s – 5% (4)	
40s – 44% (31)	70s – 7% (5)	

The generations are represented as follows:

Baby Busters – 23% (16)

Baby Boomers – 52% (37)

Builders – 13% (9)

The Silent Generation – 13% (9)

The questionnaire asked the women when they began each phase of the ordination process. Here are the results from their responses.

<u>Category</u>	<u>Total Number</u>	<u>Percent</u>
Ministerial Candidate	77	
1930s	4	5%
1940s	1	1%
1950s	1	1%
1960s	4	5%
1970s	3	4%
1980s	20	26%
1990s	31	40%
Other		
No dates/other denoms.	13	17%
1990 Local	4	5%
Deacon	50	
1930s	3	6%
1940s	2	4%
1960s	5	10%
1970s	3	6%
1980s	12	24%
1990s	22	44%
Elder	32	
1970s	4	12.5%
1980s	8	25%
1990s	17	53%
No date	3	9%

It is interesting to note the percentages for the 1990s in each category and to note the decades that are missing or in which only 1 or 2 people entered a phase of the ordination process.

Involvement in Ministry

The women responded to a question about their involvement in ministry. Only 12, 16% were involved in full-time paid ministry. The graph below pictures the involvement of the whole sample.

Why would such a small number of women be in full-time paid ministry? Here are the answers from the 55 respondents who are not in a full-time paid position.

<u>Reason</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
A. Because of the age of my children	7	13%
B. I believe that is not God's will for me now	5	9%
C. I serve with my husband as a clergy couple and the church can not afford two full-time salaries	11	20%
D. A ministry position is not open to me although I desire one.	7	13%
E. Other:		
i) Retired	8	14%
ii) Finances are not available	8	14%
iii) Attending school	5	9%
iv) Varied	4	7%

When the percentages for C, D, and E (ii) are combined we find that 47% of the women would apparently like to be in full-time paid ministry but finances and the unavailability of positions make this impossible.

The women in the sample serve in a wide range of ministries as seen in the chart below.

Assistant, Associate, or Co-pastor	28
Christian Education or Children's Ministries	24
Sole or senior pastor	11
Educators, including Professors	11
Youth Ministry	10
Administrators	10
Cross Cultural Ministry and Urban Ministries	10
Counselors	6
Chaplain	5
Music Ministry	5
Evangelism	4
College Ministry	4
Denominational Executives	4

Some of the women apparently have more than one role bringing the number of positions reported to a total larger than the pool of respondents. Only 2 women indicated that they serve as zone leaders in their conference, a position where women clergy might develop leadership skills.

Size of Church and Salary

We asked the women to identify the size of church in which they serve and to indicate the salary they receive. Here are our findings.

<u>Church Size</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
No response	25	34%
Under 75	26	36%
76 – 150	8	11%
151 – 400	8	11%
401 +	6	8%

<u>Salary</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
No response	38	52%
Under \$10,000	13	18%
\$10,000 - \$19,999	11	15%
\$20,000 - \$29,999	4	5%
\$30,000 - \$39,999	5	7%
\$40,000 +	1	1%

As you see in the chart above, 52% of the women make no salary from their ministry and 33% make under \$20,000 per year. Such statistics call for serious examination.

Call and Support

The women in this study are in ministry because they believe they are called by God. When asked to rate the factors that influenced them to go into ministry 87% rated “God’s Call” as the number one factor. For 3% it was the number two factor. Natural and spiritual gifts were rated in second or third place for 64% of the women, with love of people in second and third place for 48%. Godly mentors were in the top three ratings for 31.5% and the influence of the local church rated second and third for 16%.

We tried to identify the sources of support for women ministers. On a scale of 1 to 5 (with 1 low and 5 high) the respondents rated the support they experienced from several different groups. For all groups, the mean scores of their rating were neither high nor low.

<u>Group</u>	<u>Mean Score</u>
Sporadic Church Attendees	3.25
Local Church Leaders and Members	3.92
Peers in Ministry	3.79
Conference Leaders	3.34
Denominational Leaders	3.11

The women surveyed sensed the greatest support from the local church and secondly their peers in ministry.

The study looked at one specific area of support, that of mentors available to women. Here are the findings.

<u>Response Items</u>	<u>Percent Responding</u>
A. I have not had a mentor for my role in ministry.	38%
B. A female minister has mentored me.	16%
C. A male minister has mentored me.	60%
D. I have learned by watching female role models from a distance.	24%
E. I have had very few models of women in ministry.	66%
F. I have served as a mentor for younger women ministers.	37%

Barriers

In an effort to identify possible barriers to effective ministry the women were asked to rate on a scale of 1 to 5 their experience with the barriers listed (1 = almost no experience, 5 = frequent experience). The mean scores on all the barriers were low, ranging between 1.89 – 2.83.

“Limited encouragement from conference leaders” had the highest mean score in the list and “Lack of access to information in the conference” the lowest. Eleven persons wrote in other barriers that varied widely. The mean score on these write-in items was 4.45. Here are some of the “other” barriers with which some women had significant experience:

- Role problems with other staff.
- Lack of support from conference ministers.
- Isolation from ministry due to employment.
- Difficulty in finding a mentor.
- False stereotypes of aggressive women.
- Lack of acceptance of women in leadership.
- Lack of support of denominational leaders.
- Lack of authority to minister.
- Husband offered many more opportunities.

Satisfaction in Ministry

Three questions were designed to get at the level of satisfaction and fulfillment the women experience in ministry. They were asked, “How satisfied are you that you have been entrusted with responsibility commensurate with your gifts, call, and training for ministry.” The responses on this item were very high.

A. Very satisfied	30
B. Somewhat satisfied	30
C. Neither satisfied or dissatisfied	1
D. Somewhat dissatisfied	5
E. Very dissatisfied	2

Another item requested, “Indicate the one item which best reflects how you currently feel about ministry.” The response to this item was positive.

A. Enjoy ministry and find it personally fulfilling	58
B. Moderately enjoy the day-to-day responsibilities of ministry.	5
C. Feel ambivalent about and unsatisfied with my role as a pastor/minister.	4

The third question instructed, “Below are three scales. Suppose the top of each scale

represents your highest **personal aspiration for effective ministry** and the bottom represents your lowest personal aspiration. Where did you stand on the scale at the beginning of your ministry? Where do you stand now? Where do you think you will stand five to ten years from now?" In analyzing the data we looked at the levels of personal aspiration in relationship to the various involvements in ministry.

<u>Involvement in Ministry</u>	<u>Personal Aspiration for Effective Ministry Mean Score</u>		
	Beginning	Present	Future
A. Full-time paid	7.444	6.625	9.777
B. Part-time paid	4.250	6.625	7.875
C. Full-time unpaid	4.285	6.857	9.000
D. Full-time part-time pay	6.111	7.000	8.666
E. Part-time volunteer while in school	5.200	5.800	8.233
F. Part-time volunteer ministry with another full-time job.	6.000	7.400	9.400
G. Part-time volunteer ministry and stay at home.	7.000	7.000	9.000
H. Full-time employment in a non-church job considered a ministry.	9.500	6.250	9.666

As Free Methodist women look toward the future, they are hopeful. For all but groups A and H, the women are reaching a higher level of their personal aspirations for effective ministry now than when they began ministry.

Implications

Women Colleagues

As noted in the report of the findings, the percentage of the women in the survey that entered the ministry prior to the 1980s is low. It would appear that during the 1960s and 1970s male pastors and conference leaders had very few clergy women colleagues with whom they worked. Most of the present clergy have ministered for one or two decades when ministry was a man's world, when male language for the pastor applied, when no one thought about whether or not it was appropriate to place men in all the conference leadership positions and have all men on the platform for special events. Any thinking pattern that has been in use for several decades is hard to notice in ourselves and to change. Superintendents in the 1960s and 1970s did not have to help churches consider having a women pastor because very few were entering the ministry.

Change began in the 1980s and has accelerated in the 1990s. Women are listening to God's call on their lives and are responding in greater numbers. This calls for church leaders to respond by realizing the need to change the mindset of the denomination. This will take intentional effort to identify actions and language that excludes women, even though that may not have been intended. As we try to live out our commitment to open all positions in the church to women and men, conference and denominational leaders will need to stand with the women they ordain and help churches think through their openness to a woman pastor.

Salaries

In a sample that represents 54.7% of the clergy women in the denomination, it is startling to

discover that only 16% are in full-time paid positions within the church, that 10.6% work full-time in ministry without pay, and that 12% work full-time for part-time pay. When we add to those figures the fact that only 13% of the women are making \$20,000 or more, major questions are raised about the church's support of women clergy.

It is amazing that so many women are willing to minister without pay or in situations where they are seriously underpaid. And they work under these circumstances with a positive attitude, reporting high levels of satisfaction regarding the investment of their gifts in ministry and enjoyment in their ministry.

Level of Support

Another issue that needs to be looked at is the level of support that the women sense in the church. As noted above, although they do not report very low scores on support, the scores are not high, 3.11 – 3.92 on a 5 point scale. The support of conference (3.34) and denominational (3.11) leaders received the lowest scores. We could explain this away by saying, that is natural because they are at a distance. However, as members of the Board of Administration, you are in a position to influence conference and denominational actions and make a difference in the support experienced by our women clergy. Ways of influencing the denomination and conferences are identified in the recommendations below.

When asked, "In what ways has the church encouraged your pursuit of the ministry," most of the women mentioned the local church as their major source of encouragement. Some did mention bishops and superintendents. Being placed in significant conference roles communicated confidence and trust in their abilities. Women are encouraged when they are given opportunities to apply their gifts and when they receive equal pay for the work they do. It is important to note that 13.7% of the women indicated that they did not feel encouraged by conference and denominational leaders.

Barriers

In looking at the barriers women had encountered along their path toward ministry in the Free Methodist Church, none of the barriers identified had high mean scores. However, the respondents who indicated that they did not believe they had "been entrusted with responsibility commensurate with [their] gifts, call, and training for ministry" had experienced more than the average of the following barriers:

Lack of opportunity to exercise all my gifts	4.43 (on a 5 point scale).
Limited access to peer networks, isolation	4.00
Limited encouragement from conference leaders	3.83
My voice not listened to in the discussion of ministry issues	3.57
Lack of opportunities for influence and decision making in the conference	3.16.

Hope

The women were asked, "what indicators of hope do you see in the Free Methodist Church that would encourage women in ministry?" Their responses seemed to indicate that the hope they saw was a glimmer of hope. When they mentioned what they appreciated it was in the context of encouraging more of the same. The highest number of responses referred to people in leadership, bishops, superintendents, and the MEG board members. They reported some signs of hope, but

expressed the desire to have these leaders be more vocal in their support of women in ministry. When a woman is placed in a leadership position, this is encouraging. However, the women were concerned about more women being appointed as senior pastors.

Several mentioned the Light and Life issue on women in ministry as encouraging and also the fact that the denomination was surveying them. The support of male colleagues, some who have even made public apology to women, is a hopeful sign. The Wesleyan Holiness Clergy Women's conference has also been a blessing.

Essential Actions

Of the open-ended questions on the survey, the women seemed to give the most energy to the question: "In your opinion, if the Free Methodist Church desires to encourage and release the full potential of women in ministry, what actions are essential?" Forty four percent of the women gave a response that related to education. They want Free Methodists to be taught the denomination's stance on women in ministry. This could be part of membership classes and should be included in the education of young women and men in Sunday school and places such as IYC. They desire education on how men and women work effectively together. This would be helpful for working at the local church and conference levels. It is important in our society for pastors to be aware of sexual harassment issues. Leadership is in need of instruction on inclusive language and assistance in become aware of where they fail to use it.

The suggestions with the next highest response had to do with placing women in leadership positions such as senior pastors, superintendents, and bishops (38% response). Young women contemplating God's call to ministry need to be seeing women active in the leadership of the church at all levels. There is need for leaders to continue speaking out in support of women in ministry. Women want not only lip service but actual support. Seven respondents stated that pastors should not be appointed if they do not agree with the denomination's stand on women in ministry. In a time when men such as Promise Keepers are making public apologies for their sins of racial discrimination, some of the women indicated that public apologies to the women of the church for gender discrimination would be in order.

Recommendations

Based on our findings, the study committee recommends that the Board of Administration take the following actions.

1. Recognize the special sensitivities of the women in ministry issue. We counsel grace on all sides.

2. Request all conferences to study the salaries of their ministers with particular attention to the salaries of women clergy to be sure that the women are receiving salaries commensurate with their contribution to the ministry of the churches in which they serve.

3. Have denominational leaders work with women clergy to develop awareness raising and instructional seminars and present those seminars in gatherings of superintendents and pastors. The seminars would help male and female clergy better understand the perspectives of one another and how to work more effectively together for the advancement of God's Kingdom.

4. Have denominational leaders enlist the assistance of women clergy to work with superintendents providing the superintendents with ideas that they will use to help churches prepare to accept a woman pastor.

5. Encourage conference and denominational leaders to enhance communications in the

denomination so that clergywomen and clergymen perceive that women's voices are heard and do make a contribution.

6. Call all who plan conference, denominational, and local church events to regularly have, as a public model, both men and women leading together.

7. Commission the development of a study guide on the biblical understanding of women's roles in the church.

8. Establish a support system for women in ministry that includes mentoring and networking, support from other women and male colleagues.

9. Request conferences to provide support and scholarships for women clergy to attend inspirational and enrichment events that are equitable with the support provided for clergymen.

10. Order the continued monitoring of trends in the leadership of women in the church, both lay and clergy women.

11. Make this study of clergywomen an on-going research project to include a follow up survey in 3 – 5 years, using the same questionnaire for comparative analysis.