

United Methodist Clergywomen Retention Study II

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In July of 2010, the Anna Howard Shaw Center, co-sponsored by the Clergy Lifelong Learning office, Division of Ordained Ministry at the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry launched a two year research project concerning clergywomen in the United Methodist church; United Methodist Clergywomen Retention Study II. The first United Methodist Clergywomen Retention Study concluded in 1997, 38 years after the initiation of women's ordination in 1956. It attempted to gain insight into clergywomen's experiences, more specifically, the various ways in which they participated in ministry. Additionally, the research project sought to "identify reasons why large numbers of clergywomen were not serving local churches and to propose possible interventions by the connectional structure, who intended to retain clergywomen in local church ministry."¹ The findings of the first retention study revealed that the primary reasons UMC clergywomen left local church ministry were: 1) "lack of support from the hierarchical system, 2) unable to maintain one's integrity in the system, 3) rejection from congregation/parishioners, and 4) conflict of family and pastoral responsibilities."² Overall, the study revealed the difficulties clergywomen encountered in ministry, their personal lives, and structural factors of church life as they attempted to live out their calling.

Even as women's rights and situations improved in society-at-large and women's status in the church improved both economically and politically, complaints regarding clergywomen's persistent struggles were continually heard since the initial study. Many of these complaints were discovered through the Anna Howard Shaw Center's annual conference, Women in the World, and other programs and research sponsored by the center. Primarily, clergywomen voiced their suspicions about the stated progress or improvement regarding clergywomen's ministerial experience. Therefore, after careful consideration and discussion with various organizations, the Anna Howard Shaw Center embarked upon a second research project focused upon the experiences of UMC Clergywomen in the twenty-first century. The purpose of the second study was to determine, what if any changes in clergywomen's ministerial experience occurred since the initial study two decades earlier. With the support and assistance from the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, particularly, the Director Rev. Dr. HiRho Park, the Anna Howard Shaw Center launched the UMC Clergywomen's Retention Study II. In June 2010, the General Board of Pensions and Health Benefits of the United Methodist Church provided the following numbers of possible survey participants: 7,531 active clergywomen and 2,700 retired.

¹ Margaret S. Wiborg, and Elizabeth J. Collier, United Methodist Clergywomen Retention Study, (Anna Howard Shaw Center: Boston University School of Theology, 1997), Chapter, 1, 1.

² Margaret S. Wiborg, and Elizabeth J. Collier, United Methodist Clergywomen Retention Study, (Anna Howard Shaw Center: Boston University School of Theology, 1997), Chapter 3, 29.

Invitations, both snail and email, were sent to both active and retired clergywomen with 1906 responding for a response rate of 18.6%.

The Clergywomen Retention Study II divided its findings into three categories: 1) Answering the Call - which sought to obtain insight into why clergywomen entered ministry, the position in which they expected to serve, and where, 2) In and Out - sought to obtain the number of clergywomen either “in” and “out” of local church ministry, and 3) Responding to why – sought to obtain insight into reasons why clergywomen departed ministry either permanently or temporarily.

In response to Answering the Call, both our previous research and current research concur that “while a large majority of the participants indicated a non-specific call to ministry, their intended appointment after receiving their elders’ orders indicates their commitment to local church ministry.”³ Furthermore, this reason was consistently the main reason for them to seek ordination. However, the survey revealed a reduction in the number of clergywomen who indicated a call to be a local pastor after receiving elder’s orders in general and especially for racial ethnic clergywomen. Even so, it is still true that the call to ministry is very vital and clergywomen’s desire to be in a local church is a big part of their call.

The second area of the study, In and Out, sought to obtain the number of clergywomen who were either “in” or “out” of local church ministry. In general, all regions show about 20% to 30% growth for clergywomen’s participation in local church ministry. Therefore, we conclude that the percentages of “In Local Church” are significantly higher compared to the previous research. Regarding clergywomen who left temporarily, the current research indicated that racial ethnic clergywomen and white clergywomen left and returned at similar rates, 17.8% and 17.4% respectively. However, for racial ethnic clergywomen, the current research discovered a higher percentage with temporary exits (17.8%, previously 12%), while white clergywomen percentages remained consistent (17.4%, previously 17%). Lastly, the number who departed on a permanent basis, showed no significant increase from the previous survey.

Finally, in determining why clergywomen departed ministry, the top reasons were: “lack of support from the hierarchical system” for ethnic minorities and “to follow a call to another kind of ministry” for white clergywomen. A few clergywomen provided additional comments to support their reasons for departure: 1) Abuse from parishioners with no accountability for their actions, 2) Unethical behavior of Senior pastor, 3) Retirement, 4) Wasn’t doing good self-care, 6) The moving (etc.) destroyed my health and self-esteem, etc.

Over the twenty-year period, dramatic changes related to clergywomen’s participation in local church ministry regardless of their race, marital status, clergy partners, or denominational

³ Margaret S. Wiborg, and Elizabeth J. Collier, *United Methodist Clergywomen Retention Study*, (Anna Howard Shaw Center: Boston University School of Theology, 1997), 6.

backgrounds has occurred. Our current research shows that the retention rates in local church ministry of clergywomen have increased, and that many clergywomen are actively participating in local church ministry. However, the primary reason for leaving the local church ministry for clergywomen has not changed over the past two decades.

The entire research document is available on the [Anna Howard Shaw Center website](#). A research summary will be published in two phases in the Anna Howard Shaw Newsletter. The first summary was published in the Fall 2012 newsletter and the second will be published in the upcoming Spring 2013 newsletter. The results and theological implications of this research will be presented in the Women in the World Conference 2013 “Occupy the Church”: Economic Justice for Ministry in the 21st Century, April 10, 2013 engaging the conversation with other presentations more in depth.