



Women In Ministry

Since 1958, the Church of the Brethren has granted women "full and unrestricted rights in ministry." Currently, in the Church of the Brethren, we have a unique situation in which women are serving in the highest denominational positions. It is important to celebrate this fact, and recognize the genuine changes that have taken place.

However, the achievement of a few women in important positions does not remedy the fact that women continue to experience discrimination and resistance to their ministry because of their gender. There continues to be a climate that subtly hinders, challenges, questions and silences women in ministry.

While women can find positions in churches, many churches are simply unavailable to women. As you can see in the Ministry Statistics box on the right, only 13% of working pastors in the church were ordained women as of the last official survey of ministerial leadership in the Church of the Brethren. It is a sobering experience for many women to read through church "profiles" and find that certain churches explicitly state they will not hire a woman.

In congregations with multiple ministerial staff, it is rare for the senior pastor to be female and even more rare for more than one to be female on the ministerial staff. Women seminary students often report their despair or fears about finding a place that will accept their ministry, and many opt for non-traditional ministry settings that are more accepting of women.

Ministry Statistics in the Church of the Brethren

Last updated August 2001

2000 ordained men and women:

- ✘ 1700 men, 85%
- ✘ 300 women, 15%

1190 ordained men and women serving in pastoral roles:

- ✘ 1035 men, 87%
- ✘ 155 women, 13%

401 licensed ministers:

- ✘ 289 men, 72%
- ✘ 112 women, 28%

162 licensed ministers serving in pastoral roles:

- ✘ 137 men, 85%
- ✘ 25 women, 15%

Questions for Thought & Discussion

As you consider these facts, the following questions can be used to promote discussion and dialogue on this issue.

- ✘ Brainstorm reasons why female seminary students experience despair and fear about entering ministry. What are the subtle messages that hinder and silence women in ministry?
- ✘ According to Galatians 3:28, becoming part of the Christian community is to leave behind the hierarchies of inferior and superior roles. How does this scripture relate to women in ministry? How does this relate to your local church or the Church of the Brethren denomination?
- ✘ Talk about women you know who are in ministry. What skills, expertise and strengths does she bring? Have you ever had a female pastor at your church? Discuss your experience.
- ✘ If you prefer a male pastor or oppose women in ministry, discuss why you are uncomfortable with women ministers? Invite others to respond and offer other perspectives.
- ✘ Since the Church of the Brethren officially approves the ordination of women, do you feel responsible to create an atmosphere that is welcoming of women to participate fully in leadership? Why?
- ✘ If you support women in ministry, discuss various reasons why there is resistance to women in ministry? Brainstorm ways to respond to this resistance.
- ✘ Invite a female pastor or seminary student to talk with you about her experience of being a woman in ministry.
- ✘ Are there things that your church could do to increase a welcoming environment for women and girls who are interested in church leadership? What things do you do well? What could be improved?

Supporting Women in Ministry

We know that the Holy Spirit speaks through people of all kinds. Yet, because of the patriarchal bias of church structures even today, women in ministry face particular challenges when exercising their gifts. Womaen's Caucus of the Church of the Brethren offers the following suggestions to help you support the female pastors in your congregation and affirm the blessing of their leadership.

Discuss this list – and the need for it – with your group. *What does it mean to be a woman in ministry today? What are the challenges you have faced or have seen others face? How can you as a feminist support your female pastors? What should more congregations know about their pastors' experiences, and what should more pastors know about their congregations?*

- ✘ **Hire women!** It may be obvious to some that women make great pastors, but there are still congregations that have yet to experience the blessings of female ministry. There are also many qualified female ministers in need of pastorates. The first step in support female pastors is making sure there are plenty of them!
- ✘ **Let your pastor know you support her – and why.** Even pastors need positive affirmation for their work. Congregants as well as pastors can take part in fostering a supportive climate, which benefits everyone.
- ✘ **Don't count on your pastor to change your mind for you.** Do not repeatedly tell your female pastor that you dislike female pastors or thought you would never like one but you do like her. Having an honest discussion about this once or twice may be helpful to you, but bringing up your pastor's gender repeatedly just serves to remind her that others in the congregation may harbor these thoughts about a characteristic she cannot control and should not have to defend.
- ✘ **Let her voice be heard.** Take the time to optimize your sound system (if you have one) to best suit the female voice in the pulpit. Some people have a harder time hearing women in the pulpit because the sound system levels are optimized for lower male voices. Educate those in the congregation that they may be having trouble hearing her not because she talks 'soft' or doesn't 'speak up' but because higher voices are harder to hear and often hearing loss occurs in these ranges before it does in the lower ranges.
- ✘ **(Physical) safety first.** Be aware that a female pastor may have safety issues that a male does not have, especially in urban or very isolated areas. Provide adequate lighting in the parking areas and be responsive to concerns about safety in nighttime situations, etc.
- ✘ **See pastors as sisters.** A big part of feminism is women helping women become all they can be, even when some women are pastors and others aren't. Sisterhood is powerful, especially in the Church of the Brethren!
- ✘ **Let go of a single model for what makes a good pastor.** The winds of Pentecost blow through all different kinds of disciples, making different sounds, speaking different languages. No two pastors will approach their ministry the same way, especially when they come from different backgrounds. And that's a good thing!
- ✘ **Make sure men lead the children's story, too.** Kids need role models of all genders in their lives, and the church community is one of the best places for them to get that. Especially if your pastor is female, make sure that kids get to connect with understanding, mature men in the children's story and in other parts of church life.
- ✘ **Keep clothing comments relevant.** While a pastor's clothing may indeed reflect on the congregation and shape the worship experience, female pastors often feel under special scrutiny for what they wear. One pastor reported wondering if her congregants were even listening to her sermon, or just judging her clothing! Another pastor mentioned received both praise and critique of an outfit in a single day, revealing how individual many of these comments are. Congregational expectations of proper dress for ministers of all genders should be formally addressed with pastors, but casual remarks of personal judgments about a pastor's clothing choices are often unhelpful.
- ✘ **Ask, don't assume, what ministries your pastors are interested in.** Don't assume that female pastors want to be more involved in the children's programs or craft groups than a male pastor would be.
- ✘ **Don't check your feminism at the door to the church!**

Single Female Pastors

- ✘ **Resist the urge to match-make.** Both male and female single pastors may be quite content being unpartnered. Even if they aren't, it is their responsibility to take care of their own romantic needs, outside the church setting.
- ✘ **See "singles" as complete.** Single people in the church, both pastors and laity alike, sometimes feel like they are regarded as less than whole on their own, as if they are just waiting for a partner to attain completion in life. Remember that you hired one pastor for the job, not a couple!

Female Pastors with Partners and Spouses

- ✘ **Support partners, too.** Being part of the family of a pastor can seem like full-time work. Let partners and spouses know you appreciate them for who they are and for being the primary support person for your pastor.
- ✘ **Remember who you hired.** A pastor's partner may be involved in the life of the church, and s/he may not. Remember that partners are probably helping out the church a lot in ways you don't see, by sustaining your pastor in her ministry. Also remember that it's not a husband's job to "approve" his wife for ministry any more than it is a wife's job to approve her spouse's work.

First-time Female Pastors

Know what you know – and didn't know. Remember the challenges you faced at your first job, or think about the challenges you expect to face when you start a career. Being a pastor is a very special job, but it shares many of the same stresses as other callings.