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LESLIE BUMGARDNER
**ADVENTIST WOMEN CLERGY:
THEIR CALL AND EXPERIENCES**

Abstract: Around the world, Seventh-day Adventist women are serving in pastoral ministry. However, little research has been conducted about the calling and experiences of these women. This article shares the stories of 11 Adventist women pastors in North America, including their call to ministry, mentoring, their experiences as mothers, how they differ from their male colleagues, challenges they face, why they consider leaving pastoral ministry, and why they choose to stay.

Keywords: *Female clergy, Seventh-day Adventist women pastors, pastoral calling, mentoring, gender differences, leaving ministry, staying in ministry*

In various places around the world, Adventist women are serving in pastoral ministry. Not a new phenomenon, this goes back to the beginnings of the Adventist church, when Ellen G. White served as one of the foremost leaders of the church. However, not much is known about these women pastors. The purpose of this article is to share the stories of 11 Adventist women pastors in North America. They represent a rather unique sample in that, at the time of the interviews, all of them had served more than 10 years in pastoral ministry, were educationally prepared for this work, and were receiving a full-time pastoral salary from a local conference. These three characteristics contributed to their uniqueness because, at the time of the interviews, few women pastors had all three characteristics. There were others who were theologically trained, but who served in chaplaincy or as Bible instructors. Others did not receive a full-time pastoral salary or were employed by the local church rather than by the conference. Collectively, the women in this study had served over 150 years as church pastors. My goal was to understand their experience and what contributed to their longevity in ministry.

At the time of this study (Bumgardner, 2005), the women had served in 31

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churches in the United States; in 22 of these churches, they served as the first woman pastor for the congregation. Although not the first women to serve as pastors in the Adventist church, several would be listed among the “pioneers.” The group split almost evenly between those who served in church settings with other women pastors and those who served by themselves or only with male colleagues. For several women, pastoral ministry represented a second, third, or even fourth career, as is typical of women clergy more generally (Carroll, Hargrove, & Lummis, 1983; Charlton, 1987, 2000; Zikmund, Lummis, & Chang, 1998).

The family circumstances of these women varied through their years of service. Among them were single, married, and divorced women. While serving as pastors, they parented 17 children. The group included several who were empty-nesters. Their self-descriptions demonstrate their diversity: “planner,” “shy,” “a pastor who happens to be a woman,” “competent,” “lonely,” “peacemaker,” “works best in the background,” “assertive,” “workaholic,” “evangelist,” “gifted by God,” “takes care of others,” “people-pleaser,” “nurturer,” “doesn’t have an agenda,” “thinks outside the box,” “teacher,” “private person,” “loner,” “distrustful,” and “not a feminist.”

It Began With Their Calling

The strongest theme running through all the narratives was the way these women were responding to the call of God in their lives. For many of them, their early involvements in spiritual activities culminated in their recognition of God’s call to enter pastoral ministry. Some, however, had never seen a female pastor, and only after some time did they realize God’s call was to serve as a pastor. They found their call encouraged by family members, professors, and friends; however, they also experienced discouraging attitudes from family members, professors, and friends. At times, they doubted or even denied their call to ministry.

One of the pastors, Gail, is a third-generation pastor who from the age of three was up front doing things in church. She described her experience this way: “If the church had a Week of Prayer, it wasn’t young people’s Week of Prayer, it was a church Week of Prayer. They would ask me to speak.” Another pastor, Ann, said, “When I was probably about 13 years old I wrote my own sermons and presented them at evangelistic meetings our church hosted. One woman I studied with was baptized at the end of the series.” [The identity of Gail, Ann, and the other women named in this article has been masked through a blending of their stories and by changing the specific places, people, and events referenced in the interviews.]

When Margaret’s children entered school, she returned to employment as a

social worker while working at her local church, leading women's Bible study groups, studying the Bible with individuals, and working with children and teens. "I continued my work as a social worker for about six to eight months after I really sensed this call," she said. "During this time I was leading people to Christ. In fact, that year five people with whom I shared the gospel and studied Adventist beliefs were baptized into the church."

During a moment of discouragement, Elizabeth's husband encouraged her. "Conference leaders may not want you to be a pastor," he said, "but I know that Jesus does." And a former professor affirmed her calling by saying, "I know God has gifted you." Elizabeth summarized this time: "Different people would say to me, 'You know, you should really be a pastor.' My call to pastoral ministry kept coming back at me."

Jacqueline did not find all church members supportive of her intention to attend seminary. On one occasion, some well-intentioned church members prayed for her when she announced that God had called her into ministry. She laughs about this now:

I thought they were going to pray for me to go to school. But they really prayed that this desire would go away, and God's Spirit would direct me to be a nurse or a teacher, but not a minister.

After serving as a pastor for several years, Alice commented about the ways through which God would bring people into her path to remind her of her call. During one particularly difficult conflict with a colleague, a conference leader said to her, "Don't let this separate you from the call God has given you." Her call to ministry just never goes away.

In fact, as Helen looks forward, she envisions this call remaining with her into retirement and beyond. "I can see myself working for people's eternal salvation until the day I die," she said passionately. "That's my call."

Cynthia's call to pastoral ministry began when she was a young child. Later, she spoke of the impact the death of her teen-age brother had on her life: "It helped me get closer to God. I was pushing away, but at the same time trying to bring God closer." Then, during her high school years, when she saw a picture of an Adventist woman pastor performing a baptism, she was drawn to that picture, "mesmerized by it." "I felt something inside of me saying, 'You have to become a pastor.' The more I thought about it, the more I was convicted of God's leading. I felt a deep calling."

Susan described her own resistance to the calling of God when she openly taught in her Sabbath School class that God would not call women to ministry. This really became a crisis for her when she heard the Holy Spirit calling her to ministry. "I knew God's voice," she said, "and there was no question what God was telling me to do."

One of Alice's theology professors encouraged her preparation for ministry, but she had doubts: "No way. Absolutely not." She then set up a whole series of hurdles for God before she would accept that God was calling her to pastoral ministry. In the next few months every one of her hurdles was overcome, and she changed her college major to pastoral theology and began preparing for ministry.

During a difficult time in her early ministry, Gail remembers getting in her car and just driving and driving and driving. She found herself going around for probably an hour crying and saying, "Lord, could you just give me a Damascus Road experience?" But none came. She took her Bible and wrote in the front of it, "Lord, I'm here. Please use me if you want me to be here." She realized more clearly that ministry was not going to be easy, and if you are truly called, you will stick it out.

Susan bluntly stated, "If I were to run from this call, I would be disobeying His voice to me."

What becomes clear in listening to these women's stories is their deep sense of calling. They are doing what God has opened doors for them to do. They are doing what God has gifted them to do, even though family, friends and church members have objected or tried to discourage them. To ignore this call would be to deny God's specific direction in their lives. Ministry has become more than just a job to these women; it is a sacred vocation. They are following the inner call of God that leads them to identification with and commitment of their lives to pastoral ministry.

Pastors employed by the Adventist Church are expected to demonstrate a calling to ministry: "The ministry is not merely a profession; it is a calling" and a life commitment (North American Division of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2003-2004, p. 491). Three spiritual qualifications for pastors are included in the first chapter of the manual published for Adventist clergy (*Seventh-day Adventist Minister's Manual*, 1992). They are "a personal call from Christ," "a personal relationship with Christ," and "a personal empowering by Christ" (pp. 17-19). The gifts to effectively serve as a minister will become evident in those who are called to serve. These gifts include "moral earnestness, leadership, intelligence, common sense, relational skills, and teaching ability" (p. 19).

Observe the deep commitment to their call to ministry as reflected in these final comments: "I want to be a pastor. And that's where my passion is. It's the everyday opportunity to do that." "For me it's about working with the people God has sent. And so I'm not going to run away. I'm not going to quit. I will serve." Ann, one of the women pastors who initially resisted God's call in her life, put it this way: "I never dreamed of this. Never dreamed, never dreamed. It was too big to dream."

Mentoring

The women in this study acknowledged the absence of female mentors and their desire for mentoring relationships. As one looks closely at the ministry of these women and at the churches they have served, it becomes clear why they have had so few women clergy role models and mentors. A majority of the women began their education and ministry when there were few other women serving. In addition, geographical disbursement during their years of ministry has generally placed them in settings where there were no other women clergy in close proximity.

Much of what they described as mentoring was observation of people they respected, including teachers and family members, and then integration of aspects of their approaches to their own lives and ministries. Additionally, they all identified more than one source for this mentoring, as reflected in Margaret's comment: "Probably little pieces from a different collection of people."

Elizabeth says that when she began pastoral ministry, "there were no women I could look to and say, 'This is how they did it.' There were not any women pastors who were a part of those years." Regarding when she entered her first ministry position, Jacqueline says, "My male colleagues were my most significant mentors. They were very supportive and encouraging." With a great deal of emotion, Helen reflected on the senior pastor at the church where she was first assigned: "I worked with him for eight years and found him to be a huge influence. When I was ready to baptize my first candidate, he practiced with me in the school swimming pool before the actual event." As Cynthia talked, she realized how instrumental her first pastoral colleagues had been in mentoring her. "Pastor Jim was the one who really, really mentored me and moved me into pastoral ministry," she said with tears in her eyes. "I have a lot to be thankful for. I didn't really realize until right now how much he really did mentor me."

Some mentioned rather unusual sources of mentoring: books, seminar speakers, women in leadership in other fields, and tape and film presenters. "Much of my mentoring was from a distance," reflected Susan, "with persons I did not even know personally and who were not always pastors, but persons whom I admired and wanted to emulate." In part, they talked about these sources as important because of the lack of female clergy mentors.

Alice expressed her specific desire for mentoring by other women in ministry. "I'm kind of hungry for women in ministry. I didn't have a lot of mentors." She commented, "I see mentoring as one of those kinds of things that needs a relationship and at least periodic contact, and I'm so far from women in ministry."

Studies of women managers and professionals have shown a similar lack of

female mentors; as a consequence, women's mentoring relationships are more often with men (Burke & McKeen, 1990; Noe, 1988; Ragins, 1989; Schwiebert, Deck, Bradshaw, Scott, & Harper, 1999). Studies of women clergy have shown this lack of female mentors or a wish for more mentoring to be true for them as well (Bennett, 1993; Craley, 1990; Frame & Shehan, 2004; Kleingartner, 1999; Lawless, 1993; Vance, 1999). The lack of and desire for female role models for clergywomen were especially pronounced in a study of United Methodist clergywomen (Hale, King, & Jones, 1985). This study found this lack of role models to be "the most consistently troublesome problem important to clergywomen at every career stage" (p. 73).

Studies on mentoring for women in organizations generally have also found that female mentors are seen as especially important when addressing issues of the balance of work and family, avoiding sexual issues that can arise in cross-gender mentoring, and understanding how to negotiate the challenges of working in a male-dominated career (Egan, 1996; Ragins, 1989; Ragins & McFarlin, 1990; Ragins & Scandura, 1994). These are issues that the women in my study have also had to address, generally without access to female mentors.

Pastors as Mothers

The women in this study juggle multiple roles, most notably that of pastor and mother. They have raised or are raising a total of 17 children. At the time of the research, eight of these children were high-school age or younger; the remaining nine children were college age and above. At times the women wonder if they can effectively manage; yet they find ways to make it work.

Gail spoke of when she announced her first pregnancy to her congregation: "I began to hear both pregnancy and miscarriage stories. These stories provided a new connection with women of my congregation. I had now entered a journey others had traveled and felt free to share." Three weeks before her baby was born, a member of Cynthia's congregation died and she officiated at the memorial service. "It was such a challenge. It was hard to act professional and keep my composure when the baby was kicking . . . hard."

After her maternity leave, Ann returned to work with her baby in tow. "When Tara was born, I took her everywhere with me. It was especially workable because I nursed her and didn't have to worry about bottles and formula." On Sabbath mornings her husband Andy would take the baby to Sabbath School and church while Ann taught a Sabbath School class and preached. Even after she discontinued nursing Tara, Ann said that she "still took her to committee meetings, on visits and to Bible study appointments."

Margaret described her experience of parenting with a young son in this

way: “It was really a shared journey. And people loved to see him.” Elizabeth refused requests to speak outside her own church at retreats and in other settings that would take her away from her children. When reflecting on the challenges of juggling the roles of both pastor and mother, she chuckled:

The great thing is I get to be with them a lot. I don’t feel like someone else is raising my children, which is important to me. The bad thing is that it’s just really busy. In the good times I almost make it work.

Common themes are evident between this study and Carruthers’s (2003) study of Christian women in academia. Both found motherhood to be a role highly valued by these professional women. They acknowledged that the intensive demands while they have small children are seasonal and recognize that a time of less intensity will come.

Kolton (1999), Zikmund et al. (1998), and Bennett (1993) found the views of congregations challenged when their female pastor was pregnant and when parenting small children. Zikmund et al. (1998) found the following:

Clergy women take more responsibility for raising children than do clergy men . . . and [are] nearly three times more likely than clergy men to report having difficulty in carrying on a full-time ministry at a time when they have children under ten years old. (p. 89)

Some studies on women clergy conclude that significant role strain comes from balancing work and family (Carroll et al., 1983; Hale et al., 1985; Lehman, 1985; Zikmund et al., 1998). It is interesting to note that in the years between Carroll et al. (1983) and Zikmund et al. (1998), the situation for women has not changed. This statement from Bateson (1989) summarizes well the situation of the women in this study: “The conflict between motherhood and career came not from the macho hours demanded by ambition but from the challenge to provide direct and sustained caring in two different places” (p. 154).

Gender Differences

I did not specifically ask the women in this study how they functioned differently than their male colleagues. However, the women brought up this topic at various points in the interviews. The differences they described ranged from their more relational approach in ministry to being the lone soprano among a chorus of tenors, baritones, and basses in the pastors choir.

Almost all the women see themselves as more intuitive and better at relating to parishioners than their male colleagues. After a difficult meeting with parishioners, one of Jacqueline’s male colleagues commented on how well it went. She had a very different perspective: “I saw the meaning behind what the parishioners verbalized and observed members left deeply angry and frustrated.”

Helen remembered the comment of her supervising pastor after her first

sermon during her internship: “As I listened to your sermon I realized that the criteria I use to critique sermons of young men doesn’t work. I’m not sure why.” That was her first realization that her sermon content and delivery were different from that of her male colleagues.

“I love to make sure people get touched, because I think that is so important,” said Cynthia, speaking of her joy in mingling with and greeting people on Sabbath morning. “So many people don’t get touched. And I feel as a woman I can do that in ways my male colleagues can’t.”

As my interviews progressed, the women spontaneously offered the above reflections of their perception of differences. Zikmund et al. (1998) summarized in this way: “Women clergy often bring a different charisma from men, a different style of leadership, and different communication styles in their interactions with parishioners” (p. 75). Even with the mixed results reported in various studies of women and men clergy, what is evident is that women and some men identify differences.

Overwhelmingly, studies of female clergy of other denominations have noted some of the same issues related to gender differences as noted by the women in this study. Notably, many perceived themselves to be more relationally oriented than their male colleagues (Bennett, 1993; Bingham, 1992; Frame & Shehan, 2004; Gorham & Waitschies, 1998; Ice, 1987; Kleingartner, 1999; Lawless, 1988; Nason-Clark, 1987; Simon, Scanlan, & Nadell, 1993; Stevens, 1989; Willhauck & Thorpe, 2001; Zikmund et al., 1998).

Smith’s (1993) study of male and female seminary students confirms what Helen’s pastor observed to her about sermon delivery. Men and women “differed in the way they displayed themselves as exegeters of a fixed sacred text” (p. 172). Women in Gorham and Waitschies (1998), Lawless (1988), and Arnold (2001) also cited differences in their preaching style.

Susan summed up her view this way:

God made us different and all those differences I bring into ministry. I don’t have to try to do it just like my male colleagues do. I realized I can add my own touch. This is why God needs women to represent him as well as men.

Challenges to Their Ministry

Before these women enter ministry as well as while they serve as pastors, disapproval and doubt about their call to pastoral ministry come from family members, college and seminary professors, conference officials, and church members. Some individuals overtly challenge their right to serve as pastors.

At times their pastoral colleagues are not supportive, even to the point of exhibiting controlling and hurtful behavior. Speaking of a pastoral colleague with whom she worked closely, Alice shared this observation: “He was a con-

trol person. And his wife was, too. They pretty much wanted to control every aspect of my life.”

Gail described situations in which she felt “invisible” to others, including times when language was used in a public setting that ignored her presence. For several hours she listened to speakers referring to the collective group of male and female pastors as “men” and “brethren” and referring to their spouses as “wife.” Midway through the speaker’s talk she began to realize her invisibility. “It was obvious I was there as a pastor and I am not a ‘man’ or ‘brother’ and I do not have a ‘wife.’”

A local church asked Ann if she was willing for her name to be submitted for a pastoral position, as she had previously served as a pastor in that conference. However, the conference leadership told the church, “Well, Ann is not a pastor.” Ann exclaimed, “I was just dumbfounded that after all that time working in that conference, they now seemed to disown me.”

The call of God to serve as pastors has led to the deep conviction by these women that they *are* pastors. Their view of themselves is wrapped up in serving God through pastoral ministry. However, they often find themselves the focal point of disapproval, which is sometimes related to gender. As Charlton (2000) states, “clergywomen by their very presence as well as their actions in positions of power—and in this case in positions symbolizing and representing divinity—are involved in changing some fundamental religious understandings as well” (p. 421).

Margaret experienced significant frustration and pain over the actions of a conference official when she was preparing to preside at the wedding of two members of her congregation. As she met with the couple to attend to the details of the ceremony, Margaret relished this opportunity to minister to this young couple at such an important point in their lives. As plans progressed, however, she began to hear discontent from the president of the conference in which she served. He told the parents of the bride that it was inappropriate for her to do the service and that they should consider a different pastor. She did not want her role as pastor to compromise the joy of the day for the family, yet she was filled with bewilderment and anger that her ability to function as a pastor to this family was being called into question.

Why should I not do this just because I am a woman? What happened?
I wasn’t doing anything wrong. Why is it right for my conference
president to deny me the opportunity to minister to this family when
the world church has stated its approval?

These questions and others plagued Margaret as she wrestled with what to do. She had been hired as a pastor, was functioning in a role approved by the world church, yet had been the center of conflict. She did go on to officiate at the service; however, the situation hurt her, because she knew it was another

example of disapproval of her ministry simply because she was a woman. She thought seriously about leaving ministry in the Adventist Church. The wedding day was joyful for those in attendance, but sadness lingered in the background for Margaret as she realized again how the actions of one person who opposed her ministry could bring such needless conflict.

While some women experience lack of acceptance by parishioners, those attitudes can change over time. Dudley (1996) surveyed the members of 20 Adventist churches in the United States and Canada who were served by a female pastor or associate pastor to determine how these female pastors were received by their congregations. He found a favorable rating of women clergy's effectiveness by their members with 91% receiving an overall rating of excellent or good. In addition, after a congregation experienced the ministry of a woman, favorable attitudes toward their woman pastor rose from 75% to 87% during her tenure. Vance (1999), who studied Adventist women in ministry, also found increased acceptance from parishioners over time.

Thoughts of Leaving

The women in this study shared times when they considered leaving pastoral ministry, when their desire to stay was tenuous. Their thoughts of leaving resulted from weighing their deep sense of being called to ministry and their identity as a pastor against the injustices and significant challenges that came. However, most of these women differentiated their call to ministry from employment by the institutional church.

Elizabeth reflected that "if the pain of ministry ever outweighs the joy, I might consider that a signal that God was saying it is time to do something else." Jacqueline stated emphatically in answer to this question, "I can't work where I'm not wanted." Helen reflected with mixed emotions about leaving: "If I were to leave it would have to relate to a huge sense of betrayal." Yet she goes on to say, "I envision leaving would entail a call to another area of ministry, or a church in a different location. I'll just have to keep my ear toward God."

Cynthia remembered ministering in the midst of significant challenges. "I was itching to leave," she says. When she went to the local conference leaders with tears streaming down her face, their response was this: "We called you to the ministry. We've sent you here, and we want you to stay. However, we will support you whatever your choice. We know it's difficult." That support gave her the freedom to stay, which she has done now for over 10 years.

Hamilton Chandler Communications (1992) conducted a survey of Adventist women pastors, chaplains, Bible teachers, and pastoral counselors for Time for Equality in Adventist Ministry. This survey of 72 women found that 70% still felt a strong call to ministry, and fewer than 10% were planning to leave

ministry, although two-thirds had thought of leaving.

Sellers (1997) commented on the strong feelings evoked in the women she studied as they thought about leaving church-related ministry. The same was true of the women in this study. They described various difficult situations: “This is the most frustrated I’ve been in my whole life.” “I was kicking against the control of this man.” “I’m the one with my neck out on the line and I’m getting chopped.” “I want to leave; I cried.” “I just lost it, and I’m not the kind of person that loses it very easily.” “I started shaking.” “My heart was racing.” These women reported that at times they felt helpless, confused, disheartened, fearful, embarrassed, ambivalent, torn, bewildered, stunned, confused, shocked, and speechless.

What is apparent is that most of them came to a point at which either a traumatic situation or a consistent flow of disapproval and challenge led them to think of leaving. All entered pastoral ministry at a time when women in ministry were few in number and when the church denied them equality of function and recognition. Sellers’s (1997) comment about working within a church system that is not based in equality is enlightening: “What none of them predicted accurately, however, was how it would feel to function for an extended period of time as a female authorized leader in an organization so structured” (p. 88).

Their continuing in difficult circumstances may be the recognition that their employment opportunities are more tenuous than for their male colleagues. They know that if they left their current church, they might not have a place to go, as some churches would not be open to talking with them about employment, simply because they are women.

Why They Stay

Susan finds that her strongest motivation to stay is her call to ministry and her willingness to hear God’s voice:

My staying really comes from my passion. I believe that God has called me to do what I’m doing. I really feel that I am making a difference. God keeps affirming it, the pleasure of it, and the joy of it.

Alice admits that the challenges come to her repeatedly, and she looked for a reason to leave. However, over and over she saw God bringing people and events together to keep her focused. “My call was confirmed again and again,” she says, “not necessarily by big things, but little things here and there.”

Of her motivation to stay, Gail says, “God called me to this for all my life. I’m committed to the Adventist Church. If I didn’t have that sense I would never have been able to stay because it would be so difficult.” She finds that

time in meditation and prayer and a connection with God empower her to keep going.

Ann knows there were times when it appeared that her impact was minimal, when she did not feel like she made a whit of difference. Then later on she might hear a story about how a moment with her had really changed someone's life. Though she acknowledges that "some of the people whose lives I've touched I don't think I'll know until eternity," she also says, "If I felt I wasn't making a difference, I would leave."

A comment made by the head elder of Margaret's church is a good way to summarize this topic:

You came here, and we didn't want you. Number one, you wanted change, and we don't like change. And number two, you're a woman. But we have learned to love you. You have had the ability to step on our toes without scuffing our shine.

Conclusion

The women in this study passionately expressed the depth of their calling. They were not merely doing the work of ministry; they were fulfilling the direction given them by God. The inner strength and resolve evident in their lives seemed vital to their staying. It was difficult for them to follow their calling—their passion—when the church or individuals they felt called to serve said they could not or should not. But though they may have talked about leaving, when challenges came to them from church members or leaders in positions of authority, they remembered that the authority by which they live their lives exceeds the authority of any earthly power. They were doing what God called them to do.

My study ended with these conclusions, but the stories didn't end for me. I would hear of a change in location for one of these women pastors, or a change in ministry for another. Some stayed in touch with me; others I lost track of altogether. What had happened to these women? Did their calling remain strong? How many are still serving as pastors? Have they been able to overcome the challenges of working in biased circumstances? Have they been able to stay focused on making a difference in the lives of people?

The wondering led me to the awareness that I wanted to know what had happened to these women. I wanted answers to these questions. So after 10 years, I began a search for these 11 women to discover what they were doing now and what they had experienced in the intervening years. Would I find them? Would they be willing to talk with me? The answers to these questions will be reported in the next issue of *JACL*.

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