

WHY CAN'T YOU JUST BE SWEET?
EXPERIENCES OF WOMEN CLERGY IN THE CHURCH OF THE NAZARENE
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Though women have been ordained in the Church of the Nazarene since its beginning in 1908, women clergy in this tradition continue to have experiences that affect their perception of full inclusion. The USA/Canada Women Clergy Council approached me about conducting this study in the belief that unearthing and naming some of the patterns in these experiences could be a first step to better practices.

Across several months in 2021 and 2022, I conducted an ethnographic project to gather stories while protecting the identity of the women who would participate. I conducted focus groups on Zoom with 29 women well-distributed across an age range from 27 to 60. The women came from every field in the United States. The sample of women were spread equally between lead pastors and associate pastors, with a few currently unassigned clergy also joining the conversation. The study participants were volunteers who responded to an invitation on the USA/Canada Women Clergy Facebook page. Because the sample was derived from volunteers, certain groups are underrepresented in the study, notably Canadian, African American and Latina women clergy. It would be beneficial to conduct another study to examine the experiences of these women clergy whose stories would also have much to teach us.

My conversations with women clergy in focus groups yielded about 16 hours of recorded storytelling. Grounded theory analysis of the focus group data reveals several themes that emerge across the groups.¹ For an idea or experience to reach the level of a theme reported here, it needed to be mentioned by multiple women and in more than one focus group. What follows are several key common experiences which surfaced among women interviewees. The themes are named and described as often as possible in the words and stories of the interviewees themselves. Key details have been changed for the sake of anonymity.

Nearly all the women in this study have common stories of difficult experiences with lay persons in congregations. They have had people walk out of services when they have preached, leave churches when they have pastored, and tell them to their faces that women should not be pastors. For the sake of this article, however, I have chosen to move past these common experiences with lay persons in local churches to address common experiences of women in the context of relationship with their ministerial colleagues and district leadership.

Some of the themes and stories below are positive, but many are stories of hurt. The stories recounted here are from the perspective of the women clergy, so we must acknowledge that we do not know the motivations of their male colleagues. Yet whether or not something was said with the intent to harm, we as the Church must acknowledge when harm has been caused and do whatever is necessary to move toward a fuller embodiment of beloved community.

¹ Kathy Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory* (SAGE Publications, 2014). Grounded theory describes an analysis tool in qualitative research in which the researcher uncovers a repeated pattern or “themes” which can be supported or “grounded” in the data. The grounding of the themes is demonstrated through stories and verbatim quotations.

"This is the best you will ever do"

Words from leaders and peers have long-term impact on women's self-perceptions. Women clergy have soundtracks that play in their heads. These soundtracks most often consist of discouraging words spoken to them, for whatever reason, by ministerial colleagues and district leadership. Years after the fact, these words continue to have power even when the women have come to acknowledge on some level that the words are not true.

One female pastor shared the story of her first pastoral assignment, when she was offered an appointment as a lead pastor in a church which was struggling greatly. The district superintendent said to her, "You are young, single, and female. A church like this is probably the best you could ever expect to do." The echo of these words continues to have impact:

It has taken me years and a lot of work to unlearn that, honestly. When the district superintendent said this, I thought, "Ok, then that must be my reality." At the time I hadn't experienced how challenging that ministry assignment was going to be--including working three jobs to support myself. Six months into the ministry assignment, I began to wrestle with the idea "If this is the best I'm going to do, I'm not going to make it. This isn't sustainable for me." If being called to the ministry as a female (and as a single person at the time) means that I am going to be running myself ragged and not have any community and not have any friends and not have anybody who really gets it, then I can't do this. Add to that not being paid even though there was money coming in--It took years before I would consider being a lead pastor again. All of this was reinforced because my very first day on that district, I went to a district training event and had a pastor walk up to me and say, "So, what does it feel like to be a little girl in ministry?"

Another pastor shared how her first opportunity to take a lead pastor role happened at a time when a situation with her child prevented an immediate move. The district superintendent told her, "You just turned down the one paid job you would ever be offered."

It was never surprising in these interviews to see fresh tears and hear a tremble in the voices of women who shared the power of such words. Story after painful story included word-for-word quotations of lines from their soundtrack. The words we use – even in some kind of attempt to create realism – have a lasting impact on the psyches of women. Words create worlds.

However, it isn't just the words that are spoken that create pain. A second theme that arose is related, but different:

It's what you didn't say

When women experience exclusion or even ridicule, and the men they believe to be teammates or supporters don't speak up, clergy women must readjust their perceptions about friendships and who is really on their team. The ridicule or exclusion is hard enough, but there is a palpable sense of loss at the lack of response from colleagues they trust. One pastor told this story:

I had to go to a meeting with several pastors. There were about 13 of us and two were women. At the end, the DS asked one of the pastors to pray for the group. As this gentleman began to pray, he started repeating what an honor it was to be serving with "these men, these brothers" repeatedly. The prayer went on for so long and became so clear that both

my friend and I started to sit up and look at each other. And we looked at the pastors that we were there with, that we were on staff with, and they were shaking with laughter like they thought it was the funniest thing ever because it was so incredibly obvious what the guy was doing.

After the meeting, no one said a word to him or to us about what happened, and we all went to dinner, and the men filled a table, forcing us to sit at a table all by ourselves, and no one invited us to sit with them. It was horrendous, and it was acceptable to all of them. It was wounding.

When others don't speak up for their inclusion, it puts women in a difficult spot. Do they speak up for the sake of other women, and if they do what will be the personal price? Being an advocate for oneself is often ridiculed or labeled as aggressive behavior. One woman on a planning committee for district assembly gathered her courage to speak up about the lack of women involved in the services. No sooner were the words out of her mouth, when another pastor on the committee joked, "Who had ten minutes for how long it would take for her to say no women were on the program?" The pastors knew the problem, had discussed it before she arrived, and were waiting to ridicule her when she noticed.

The women telling these stories are not aggressive or power-grabbing. In fact, the lack of defense of their ministry by their male colleagues leads some to self-examination and self-doubt, "It makes me doubt my very call. Am I being proud or overzealous? Am I trying to grab onto something that doesn't belong to me?"

Interview questions that miss the boat

In church board interviews and in the credentialing process, women are frequently asked about personal issues to the exclusion of theological issues. Many districts in the Church of the Nazarene have protocols in which they ask thematic questions in particular years of the licensing process (one year discussing call, another year theology, etc.). Women clergy from many districts report that their interviews rarely, if ever, stay on the prescribed theme. They are often asked intimate details, often in front of a room full of men, about their dating life, if single, and their marriages, if married. A few women reported that questions about how they would juggle motherhood and ministry or some other aspect of their personal life as a woman overtook their interviews so that they were never asked the theological questions at all.

I worked hard on the articles of faith for my district license interview. I wanted to be fully ready to have theological and ministry conversations, and the entire hour was spent on my dating life and questions about if I had plans to date. I didn't know then how inappropriate, illegal, and out of bounds that was. I could have been a Calvinist and they would have never known. There were no questions about Jesus or my call to ministry.

Sexualized feedback

The feedback women receive for their leadership or preaching is frequently sexualized in some way. Women in every focus group shared such stories. Here are a few:

After almost every sermon I preach, one of the first comments I hear is something about how somebody likes my hair or the outfit that I was wearing. It is always something

external and zero to do with any of the time I put in or what I said. In the worst-case scenarios, there have been men who said, “If I was your age, I would ask you out.” But there is little recognition for the theological task I brought forth.

Two different times, I have had older men come up after I preach and kiss me on the forehead. And these are not 90-year-old men. And if I try to talk to male colleagues about it, they say, “Well, Miss Betty is always hugging me or kissing me.” But I don’t think we can equate this. Miss Betty is 90, and hugs are not the same as forehead kisses.

There was an older pastor who felt like he could get away with saying inappropriate things to me. He would give the excuse, “I can say these kinds of things because I am however old.” The fact that he needed to follow up with that statement said something.

We were looking for a new District Superintendent, and I had been on the district board for a while, and so was in some places of leadership. We were at dinner and another pastor came to me and said, “I’m going to nominate you to be our next District Superintendent. Do you want to know why?” And then he told me, and it was sweet. But then I was sitting at a table talking with people, and I felt someone come up behind me and start to rub my neck, and I thought it was my husband, and it turned out to be another pastor who then talked about why I should be the next District Superintendent – and I share that because of the strange experience it was to be affirmed but to have it somehow associated with some kind of sexual interest. It wasn’t super public, so I didn’t blow it out of proportion, but I just think about how there is no way that would happen to a man.

When the feedback offered to women clergy is misplaced on their appearance or gender or when the feedback given is positive but mixed with something else, the result is demoralizing. Sexualized compliments are not compliments. They are, in all cases, unbecoming of a minister.

Disqualified by emotions

One repeated message that women receive is that their emotions disqualify them from pastoral leadership. One woman was told, “You are too emotional for the job of senior pastor.”

Another said, “I am a relational person and an empathetic person. I have been told that because I am relational, I must not be a strategic thinker or that because I am empathetic, I am not logical.” Many women recount that their male colleagues believe empathy to be a weakness in making leadership decisions.

One woman was resigning a pastorate where she had been much-loved. As the service began in which she would announce her resignation, she was told she was not allowed to cry. To make sure she didn’t give in to tears, a male district leader took the microphone away as soon as she made the announcement. This stereotype of women’s emotions is used often to limit their opportunities for leadership, even though the women themselves know their emotions to be a God-given gift—even a strength-- in their preaching and pastoring.

A preference for sweet instead of strong

I must admit, even as a clergy woman myself, that as a researcher I was caught off guard by this theme. I was floored when I heard it come up in some form or another in every focus group. Women clergy members are told frequently that they should be sweeter, that they should smile more, and that they should be humbler. Any kind of confidence or any mildly assertive leadership behavior calls sweetness into question.

One woman had ongoing conflict with a senior pastor because in his words “she wasn’t sweet enough.” As she told the story, it became clear that being sweet meant being submissive and never having an opinion that would challenge his.

Another woman spoke confidently about her call in an ordination interview, only to have the committee second guess her call, asking if she was sure she didn’t just “want another notch on her belt.” Her very seeking of ordination was questioned because she was accomplished in many areas of life.

A Latina woman pastoring a bi-lingual church spoke boldly about the things God was calling her to do, only to be told by a district board that she was “prouder of being Latina than of being Christian” and that “they struggled with how much she needed to talk about her culture and her reality in light of scripture.”

Women interviewees in all kinds of ministry contexts were often encouraged to smile more. None of them could imagine that ever being said to a man. These requests for sweet, smiling docility raise the question of whether our cultural values for women are usurping our theological convictions about women’s full participation in ministry.

“Will work for peanuts”

Almost every woman in this study had a story of being continually bypassed for paid ministry positions or of churches assuming they would work for free. It was very common for women to have a story of staff teams where they worked as hard as everyone else, but they were the only one on a staff team not paid.

One woman shared how she was a top student and the student body chaplain at her university, but upon graduation all the paid jobs went to less-qualified male colleagues. People wanted her to come speak or do retreats, but she could not find paid employment in the ministry.

Another woman told this story:

I was running a ministry as large as our whole church. I sat on the board while they were interviewing a pastor and listened to them try to find money to pay even more so that they could get a man to come, but I was not paid at all.

I didn’t do the ministry for the money, but once I saw them work so hard to pay a man, it began to bother me. The church voted two times not to pay me. I had to leave the church and even leave the district before anyone would see me as a minister and pay me.

Sometimes women in this situation agree to do ministry without pay to gain experience, but they find that not being paid means that they are not treated as equal partners in ministry. “I gave lots and lots of time in ministry and was district-licensed, but the church didn’t pay me, and they made it clear that I was not on staff because I wasn’t paid.”

While not all ministry must be paid ministry, it is not unreasonable for both men and women to be paid when they are doing ministry on the same team. As women and men invest in costly theological education to pursue their calling, the assumption that they might receive a salary on the other side of that education should not be a faulty one in our current pattern where most pastors are paid. However, these reasonable assumptions are not proving true for many women. One woman said, “I don’t need to be paid to bolster my ego or even to feel appreciated. I would just like to be able to cover the debt I have created for my family (by engaging in education for ministry).”

It is not the money itself that is problematic in the stories women tell. Psychology has told us for years that the more people pay for something, the more they value it. When women and men on the same team are not paid with equity, as in many of the stories told by women in this study, our values are exposed, and the message is not lost on the women affected.

“You could ruin me”

What has come to be known as “The Billy Graham Rule” is one of four rules that Billy Graham and his team of evangelists put on themselves because of the temptations they faced personally. They vowed that while traveling away from their wives, they would avoid the appearance of compromise, that they would never ride in a car with a woman or have dinner with a woman who was not their wife without someone else present. Many male Nazarene pastors follow this rule to this day, extending it to their ministerial colleagues.

In every single focus group, women clergy brought up the effect of this rule on their experiences in ministry. It seems that those who adopt this rule do not realize its effect on the exclusion of women clergy or how it feels to be kept from being at the table because you have been reduced to being seen as a temptress. Not being allowed to ride in a car with a male pastor to a district meeting, not being able to have lunch or coffee with a colleague even in a public place – these things wear on women who feel the burden of the responsibility to keep the boundaries of their male colleagues while missing out on many important conversations. Many times, it isn’t even their male colleagues who enforce the boundaries, but their wives who communicate distrust of female clergy. All of this is couched as for the shielding of the male pastor, who must be protected from his female colleagues. This communicates shame and distrust to women clergy.

One pastor said it this way,

One of my colleagues on a staff team said to me, “It is dangerous for women and men to work together. You could accuse me of something, and if you did that, then my whole career would be over.” It made me think --that is such a strange thing to be afraid of. You don’t trust me. Why is that so prominent in your thinking? There are men that are genuinely scared of women. . . . Obviously, we aren’t trying to do away with all boundaries, but we need to remember that our language and the attitudes we use with each other matter and can build trust or destroy trust.

To challenge the Billy Graham rule is not to say there should be no boundaries, but the protection of men *from* females in Graham’s rule is lop-sided and demeaning and keeps women

from ever feeling included as team members. What about a woman's reputation being ruined or a woman being harmed? Boundaries should be protective of everyone, should demonstrate mutual concern, and should not be used to keep certain people from having full participation in meetings and leadership.

When the Billy Graham rule is put aside for mutuality with proper boundaries for everyone, the effect is as dramatic as sunshine after a storm. One pastor shared how she moved to a new district, and a male pastor called to say, "I'm passing through your town, and I thought we could have lunch so I could get to know a new teammate, and we could share ministry ideas." After years in ministry, this was the first time she had ever received an invitation that should have been a normal occurrence. She got off the phone and was surprised to find herself weeping with relief.

Collegiality is built in moments like this. In fact, there were several similar themes that emerged in the study that indicate best practices for male and female colleagues in ministry working together.

Peers that act like peers

What helps women is not some grand gesture, but the simple everyday connections that peers or colleagues have with one another.

One woman shared how such a friendship affected her:

During my first lead pastorate in a tough place, another pastor just invited me to monthly gatherings where we would do sermon planning. We would dream about series together, and he taught me how to plan for a sermon series, and I would tell him about the things that were going on (at my church), and he would be apologetic. Now I realize he took me on as a surrogate staff member, and I think every new pastor needs that.

The collegial way this pastor was treated by another pastor made the difference between life and death in a difficult pastoral assignment, which could easily have been the beginning and the end of her ministerial career.

When women clergy are on staff teams or even co-pastor with a man who isn't their husband, to simply be valued colleagues and to have the trust not only of your colleague but also their spouse proves to be both refreshing and life-giving.

Normalizing advocacy of women

Women clergy don't feel helpless; they are not weak colleagues who need protecting, but they are used to being attacked for not meeting a certain stereotype when they advocate for themselves. The well-placed voices of trusted colleagues can make it acceptable for them to advocate for themselves without repercussion.

I was in an interview to be a pastor, and it wasn't all that smooth or welcoming, and then one person asked, "You have two small kids, and your husband is gone a lot with his job, so what will you do if there's an emergency in the middle of the night and your husband is gone?" I tried to answer the question, but then the District Superintendent interrupted, and he just said, "You know I've done quite a few of these interviews now, and I have never heard that question asked of a man, so I think we just need to be careful." In that moment, he made it possible for me to stand up for myself. I felt empowered to call out

those things that were kind of discreet things that people were doing because I was a woman that weren't fair – even if I just called them out in my head.

Bring us to the table

What message would women clergy like to send to their would-be champions? How do we help them bring all their gifts to the table as full participants? Women clergy in this study speak of supportive colleagues or district leaders who are trying hard to find creative ways to show their support – whether by attending a clergywomen's conference with them or by taking them on a trip to hear a powerful woman preacher. They can't miss the support in these suggestions, and yet the answer is much simpler than these generous offers.

Women clergy just want to be invited to shared tables, not in a form of tokenism, but in a spirit of mutuality and the realization that we cannot do our best work unless we sit at tables together. The gifts of both men and women are needed in a healthy clergy and on all our district teams and boards.

Just invite us to the table, they say, and while you are doing this, remember that most of us are still associate pastors. If associate pastors aren't making it to the table, then you aren't really making room for the voices of women on your districts.

“Here is what I see in you”

A soft smile comes across a woman's face as she recalls a certain conversation with a mentor or leader. No one must tell her to smile more when she recalls *this* conversation. She is remembering someone who helped her to see something in herself that she didn't see before. This is a way both male and female champions create new soundtracks for women clergy.

Someone at the denominational level invited me to a position of leadership, and later I was talking to him and his wife about that opportunity and the nice letters I had received affirming the appointment. This man said, “Well you know they're responding to what they see in you, your leadership,”

I kind of tilted my head and looked at him like I didn't understand.

Then his wife spoke up, and she said, “You don't think he asked you to do this just because he likes you, do you?”

I said, “Well, actually I kind of do.”

And then he began to explain to me that when he saw me, he saw a leader, and that I have an exceptional gift for leadership, and he gave more details – but he named something very important in me that I think is always going to be there now, and it gives me a confidence that I have never had before.

Woman after woman had a story like this one. Want to speak life to a sister in ministry so that her ministry flourishes for the good of the Church? Tell her what you value in her preaching and in her leadership. Describe in detail the unique gifts that you see in her. If she just preached in the power of the spirit, it would be best not to comment on her dress or her haircut; just tell her how you see anointing.

Conclusion

I began this study with a hunch – a hunch that there would be better stories and less pain from younger women new to ministry. Maybe, I thought, with the increased numbers of women clergy these days, things were getting better. My hunch proved to be false. True, there are certain persons on the journey of women clergy who open doors, call out giftings, and act as true partners. We also have more women clergy and more assigned women clergy than at any time in our history. Yet these positive changes have seemingly not affected deep-seated attitudes, assumptions and behaviors toward women. The experiences of women clergy in the Church of the Nazarene in the United States with their male colleagues continue to reveal unexamined biases, aggressive efforts by male pastors to maintain power, and a view of women that is more shaped by cultural influences and unholy narratives than by our official theology. Confronting and overcoming this uncomfortable reality will require a different kind of work. We must begin weeding out and repenting of habitual, ingrained values and practices, but we also must intentionally replace them with practices and values that properly reflect our theological foundations and missional mandate. So really the call to action is to listen and include. The women who have lived through experiences of what's not working are the women who can help create the new practices we need.

Can we listen deeply to the stories of these women, laying aside defensiveness to really hear? What will it look like to let these stories lead us to do the work to become a more holy people and to model beloved community in a diverse clergy? And what is at stake if we do not?