

Gender and Mentorship in the Free Methodist Church, USA

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Abstract

Women in the workforce face gender-related barriers to attaining leadership positions and resistance once they are in them. These challenges, coupled with theological objections to women in ministry leadership, form a stained glass ceiling. Mentoring can help clergywomen navigate these obstacles; however, work-life balance issues and supply and demand factors may constrain the availability of women to mentor them, leaving them to rely on men in that role or to go without. Using survey research I explore mentorship and gender in the context of the Free Methodist Church, USA, concluding that clergywomen are significantly less likely than clergymen to have a mentor.

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Gender and Mentorship in the Free Methodist Church, USA

Despite the progress that has been made since the 1950s, women continue to face gender-related obstacles to attaining leadership positions and subtle bias once they've secured them (Rhode, 2003 p. 4). They have to work harder than men and negotiate barriers their male colleagues bypass (Carli & Eagly, 2007, p. 127). Rhode (2003) noted, "Women's opportunities for leadership are constrained by traditional gender stereotypes, inadequate access to mentors and informal networks of support, and inflexible workplace structures" (p. 7). Clergywomen face the additional obstacle of theological objections to women in ministry leadership. The combination of all of these factors forms a stained glass ceiling.

The focus of my research is the Free Methodist Church, USA (FMC-USA), a Protestant Christian denomination that espouses gender equity in leadership. Since 1974 the FMC-USA has provided access to all leadership positions to both men and women; however, women continue to be dramatically underrepresented in senior leadership posts. A woman has yet to serve in the church's most senior position, bishop. Only one of 23 superintendents is female, and in 2010, women filled a mere 5% of senior pastor positions. This contrasts with their 40% representation in associate pastor roles (Janet Duncan, personal communication, April 14, 2010).

Correcting this disparity will require a concerted effort by both men and women in the FMC-USA. As Rhode (2003) observed:

An effective agenda for women's leadership confronts two central challenges. The first is to ensure that women have equal access to leadership opportunities. A second challenge is to enlist and empower women in using their leadership to advance the public interest in general and women's equality in particular. (p. 25)

Mentoring is one tool the denomination can use to promote equal access, prepare women for leadership, and enlist those already in senior positions in developing women as leaders. In this paper I will explore whether a significant difference exists between clergymen and clergywomen in the FMC-USA and their involvement in mentoring relationships.

Literature Review

Benefits of Mentoring

Mentors provide insights that can help direct, equip, and challenge less-experienced colleagues (Rhode, 2003, p. 34). A mentor can act as an advocate for his or her apprentice. Having an ally such as this is critical for women as research has clearly demonstrated that women are constrained in their ability to self-advocate (Rhode & Kellerman, 2007, p. 28; Carli & Eagly, 2007, p. 130). Furthermore, mentors can assist in developing the professional interpersonal networks that are critical for career advancement (Rhode & Kellerman, 2007, p. 13). These formal and informal connections with influential others can help open doors to senior leadership positions (Rhode, 2003, p. 34; Rhode & Kellerman, 2007, p. 23).

In 2010 I interviewed the first and only female superintendent of the FMC-USA, Lucia Delamarter. Throughout that interview she referred to men in high-ranking positions who paved the way for her leadership ascension. I, too, have experienced the benefit of having benevolent male advocates. My senior pastor lobbied the board at our church to hire me on staff and endorsed me to be the interim lead pastor during his sabbatical. My superintendent nominated me to serve on a key regional committee and invited me to sit on a national task force. Their efforts on my behalf have allowed me to expand my professional network and gain a seat at the denomination's policy-making table.

While having a benevolent male advocate can be helpful, a relationship with a same-sex mentor provides an additional benefit for women. Carli and Eagly (2007) illustrated a number of double-binds common to women in leadership: the need to balance communal attributes with agentic behavior, competence with the appearance of modesty, and forcefulness and confidence with tentativeness and humility (pp. 128-132). A female mentor can show her protégé how to navigate these. In the context of ministry, a senior clergywoman can also assist her mentee in working through the theological objections she will invariably face.

Obstacles to Mentoring

Finding women in ministry who can serve as mentors may be difficult. As of 2012, ordained male elders in the Free Methodist Church, USA, outnumbered females 1,699 to 258, an almost 7:1 ratio. Conversely, there were 393 men and 150 women in the ordination process (Janet Duncan, Personal Communication, April 13, 2012). Given these numbers, male ministerial candidates had twice as many same-gendered ordained elders from which to find a mentor than females. Women in staff positions seeking to be mentored by more advanced colleagues face a similar challenge. Within the FMC-USA in 2010, there were only 53 women serving in senior leadership positions: 52 senior pastors and one superintendent (Janet Duncan, Personal Communication, April 14, 2010).

Like their counterparts in the corporate world (Rhode & Kellerman, 2007, p. 13), women who could potentially serve as mentors are likely overtaxed with their existing commitments. Local church ministry is never-ending and demanding. Add to this service on regional or national boards, task forces, and committees—opportunities some clergywomen feel compelled to accept on behalf of their gender—and then layer on domestic duties like childcare, eldercare,

grocery shopping, laundry, cooking, and other household chores. Investing time and energy into the next generation of female leaders can easily be lost in this pile of responsibilities.

Methods

Based on the literature and my observations as an ordained Free Methodist clergywoman, I contend that women in ministry in the FMC-USA will be significantly less likely than their male colleagues to have a mentor. For the purpose of this research I have defined clergy as those who are ordained elders, consecrated deacons, or approved Conference Ministerial Candidates (CMCs).¹ I use the terms clergy and woman in ministry interchangeably.

To test this supposition I will use data gleaned from two surveys I conducted: the 2011 Free Methodist Women in Ministry Survey and the 2012 Free Methodist Men in Ministry Survey. These instruments were adapted from a questionnaire designed by Bates, Stonehouse, and Ellis (1997) at the request of the Free Methodist Church and covered a broad range of ministry-related matters, mentoring being just one. I have included the survey item on mentoring in Appendix A.

Both surveys were hosted on Survs.com. The Free Methodist Board of Bishops provided me with e-mail addresses for the 2011 survey of clergywomen. Out of a population of 430 women, I ended up with viable e-mail addresses for 360. Utilizing technology from Survs.com, I sent the women an invitation to participate, an informed consent letter, and a personalized link to the survey website that ensured each woman could reply only once. Survs.com recorded 217 responses to the survey item on mentoring, representing a 60.28% response rate for clergywomen with e-mail and a 50.47% response rate for the entire population of clergywomen.

¹ CMCs are individuals who have been approved by the local church and accepted by the leadership of the geographic region (a.k.a., conference) to move ahead in the ordination process.

At the request of the Free Methodist Board of Bishops, I routed the survey for clergymen through their regional Superintendents. The Lead Bishop, Matt Thomas, sent an advocacy e-mail on my behalf to the 23 superintendents who oversee the 25 regions (known as annual conferences) of the FMC-USA. This e-mail contained my cover letter, informed consent, and a link to the survey website. The e-mail asked these superintendents to forward the message and survey link to all of their male ordained elders, consecrated deacons, and CMCs. Shortly after sending this request, a regional leader contacted me about providing the survey in Spanish because many of the clergymen in his area had limited English proficiency. I utilized translation software to convert the survey into Spanish, then had it checked for accuracy and corrected as needed by a native Spanish-speaker who is an ordained Free Methodist elder and professional translator.

Based on the demographic information provided by male respondents all but four of the 25 conferences were represented in the data. Out of a pool of 2,172 eligible clergymen, 367 completed the survey question on mentoring; this reflects a 16.90% response rate for the population of clergymen. I collected 363 responses from the English version of the survey and four from the Spanish one.

In each of the surveys I asked respondents to check the boxes beside all of the items that were true for them on a list about mentoring. Items in this list included: I have not had a mentor, a female minister is mentoring me now, a female minister is mentoring me now, a female minister mentored me in the past, and a male minister mentored me in the past. I rearranged the order of female and male on this list to match the gender of the test-taker: for women, female ministers were listed first; for men, male ministers were listed first.

Analysis

I have asserted that Free Methodist clergywomen are less likely than their male counterparts to have a ministry mentor. This hypothesis was supported by the survey data.

Between the three surveys (clergywomen, clergymen, Spanish-language clergymen), I collected 593 total responses on mentoring. I eliminated 58 of these for providing inconsistent data, such as claiming not to have had a mentor while noting a female minister had been a mentor previously, or claiming not to have had a mentor then checking the box that indicated being currently mentored by a male minister.

Table 1 shows the data and calculations pertaining to my hypothesis. The likelihood of having a mentor differed significantly by gender, $\chi^2(1, N = 535) = 5.79, p = .02$, with clergywomen much less likely to have a mentor.

Table 1

χ^2 Test of Mentorship and Gender among FMC-USA Clergy

Observed (and Expected) Frequencies of Mentoring					
Gender	<i>No mentor</i>		<i>Mentor</i>		
Female (<i>n</i> = 188)	52 (41)		136 (147)		
Male (<i>n</i> = 347)	66 (77)		281 (270)		
Total	118		417		
Computation of $\chi^2 = (f_o - f_e)^2 / f_e$					
<i>f_o</i>	<i>f_e</i>	<i>f_o - f_e</i>	$(f_o - f_e)^2$	$(f_o - f_e)^2 / f_e$	
52	41	11	121	2.9512	
136	147	-11	121	0.8231	
66	77	-11	121	1.5714	
281	270	11	121	0.4481	
				$\chi^2 =$	5.7939
				Critical $\chi^2 =$	3.8415

Discussion

I began this paper pointing to the unique challenges women face in ministry leadership. Not only do they need to overcome the gender obstacles inherent in any workforce, but they also battle theological objections to their leadership. While having a mentor can help clergywomen navigate what can be treacherous terrain, I speculated that women would be significantly less likely than their male peers to have one. Data from my surveys bore this out.

That's the bad news; here's the good: According to the 1997 Survey of Women in Ministry, 38% of women stated that they had not had anyone mentor them for their role in ministry, and only 16% had been mentored by a female minister (Bates, Stonehouse, & Ellis, 1997, p. 6). Since that time, clergywomen in the FMC-USA have made some major strides: 28% of respondents in 2011 stated they had not had a ministry mentor, a ten percent reduction. The number of women who reported being mentored by other clergywomen has increased 25 percentage points, to 41%.² Even more encouraging is the investment clergywomen are making in their junior colleagues: 52.42% of the respondents stated that they have served as a mentor for another female minister, up from the 37% in the earlier survey (Bates, Stonehouse, & Ellis, 1997, p. 6).

Senior leadership in the FMC-USA can support this positive momentum by continuing to endorse gender equity in leadership. Promoting mentoring among women in ministry is part of this; another approach is to provide opportunities for men to be mentored by female colleagues. Only eight percent of men reported that they have or have had a woman mentor them; these types of relationships could help dispel some of the misconceptions men may have about women

² See Appendix B for more data on the breakdown of current and former mentors by gender of respondent and gender of mentor.

in ministry leadership and promote positive cross-gender networking. I am currently involved on a task force that is revamping the ordination process for the FMC-USA; mentoring will be a crucial piece of this. Providing male and female ordinands with mentors of both genders could be a powerful tool to uphold the denomination's stance of gender equity in ministry leadership.

Future studies of Free Methodist clergy can assess trends in mentoring. This could help determine if and how quickly women are making gains. In addition, they could show the extent to which both clergymen and clergywomen are being mentored and the degree to which they are experiencing gender diversity in their mentoring. Similar studies could compare the FMC-USA to other denominations, particularly those further along the road to gender parity in leadership, to see if mentorship may be a factor in promoting equity.

References

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Appendix A:
Survey Questions on Mentoring

From the 2011 Free Methodist Women in Ministry Survey:

Check all the items below that are true for you regarding mentoring.

- I have not had a mentor
- A female minister is mentoring me now
- A male minister is mentoring me now
- A female minister mentored me in the past
- A male minister mentored me in the past
- I have learned by watching female role models from a distance
- I have had very few models of women in ministry
- I have served as a mentor for another female minister

From the 2012 Free Methodist Men in Ministry Survey (English, then Spanish):

Check all the items below that are true for you regarding mentoring.

- I have not had a mentor
- A male minister is mentoring me now
- A female minister is mentoring me now
- A male minister mentored me in the past
- A female minister mentored me in the past
- I have served as a mentor for another male minister
- I have served as a mentor for another female minister

Verifique todas las declaraciones abajo que son verdad para usted en cuanto al mentorado.

- Yo no he tenido un mentor
- Un ministro masculino me mentora ahora
- Una ministra femenina me mentora ahora
- Un ministro masculino me mentoró en el pasado
- Una ministra femenina me mentoró en el pasado
- He servido como un mentor para otro ministro masculino
- He servido como un mentor para otra ministra femenina

Appendix B:
Data on Current and Former Mentors

Gender of Current and Former Mentor(s)

	Current Mentor(s)		
	Only Female	Only Male	Both male and female
Female respondents	12	32	7
Male respondents	4	84	3
<i>Total</i>	16	116	10

	Former Mentor(s)		
	Only Female	Only Male	Both male and female
Female respondents	29	57	40
Male respondent	3	235	15
<i>Total</i>	32	292	55

	All Mentors (Both Current and Former)		
	Only Female	Only Male	Both male and female
Female respondents	25	60	51
Male respondent	0	257	24
<i>Total</i>	25	317	75