

## **Women in Ministry—Still Speaking: Supporting Women Clergy into the Next Century**

### **Introduction**

Before I begin today, I want to give thanks to a few of the pioneers, firsts, and scholars – Hazel B. Gnade, Harriet Scudder, Joyce Stedje, Joyce De Velder, L’anni Hill, Kathy Jo Blaske, Ella Kikuno Campbell, Bernita Babb, Ana Bautista, Patricia Singletary, Beth Marcus, Mildred Cleghorn, Marisol Ferrer-Malloy, Regina Brannock, Denise Kingdom Grier, Young Na, Mary Kansfield, Renee House, Lynn Japinga, and Carol Bechtel.

There are many women who were pioneers and firsts, who have taught and preached, and whose names are recorded in various publications in the Reformed Church in America (RCA). There are also many women whose names and voices are not recorded but whose memory we honor by speaking out on their behalf. We do not know the pain and suffering of all who have gone before us; we only know that our pain is lesser because of them, and our scars are not as deep.

### **Women Keep Silent**

In 2019, I started a journey towards a doctorate in Organizational Change and Leadership. Little did I know when I started that my dissertation topic would shift from leadership training in seminaries and whether current training equips pastors for ministry in a church to whether leadership models and training support women’s leadership styles to Job Satisfaction and Retention of Clergy Women.

I interviewed clergywomen in the RCA concerning their experiences to determine whether women were satisfied in their ministry and, if not, why they continued to stay in ministry or left. As I prepared my work for review by my department chair, she was surprised that I had not gone into further detail about the sexual harassment and abuse of women clergy both in their preparation for ministry and in their work as ministers. My own experience and bias had closed my eyes to this issue. I told my chair that I had not drawn attention to that issue because it was part of my story and the story of many women I knew. We are silent and do not talk about it. I had accepted sexual harassment and abuse of women clergy as a norm because so many of us had experienced it, and all of us knew someone who had experienced it. We had kept silent about it for many years. My research for this fellowship highlighted that women’s struggle

to obtain leadership positions in the RCA started long ago and continues to this day. From the days we began to speak out to today, we continue to speak out. We are speaking about what we give to the church, the resistance and abuse we receive, and the joy of ministry, and we will not stop.

### **We Start Speaking**

The resistance of women as leaders in the church is as strong today as it was in the 13th century when the name of Junia was changed to Junias on the grounds that no woman could be an apostle of Jesus. This view has been held for centuries. The radical acceptance of women by Jesus and Paul was undone by the culture that insisted women should not have any prominent place in society or the church.

Much has been written about the struggle for women's leadership and ordination in the RCA as we have gone through the process and as historians have reflected upon it. Most papers on this topic indicated that the church should not prevent women from holding ordained office, including the office of Minister of Word. In 1957, the Committee on the Ordination of Women prepared a document for presentation to the General Synod (1957), concluding that they could not find a Scriptural reason for excluding women from ordination to the various offices of the church.

Yet, there was resistance. In 1969, Morris G. Folkert wrote to Mrs. John Beardslee concerning women leaders in the church, stating, "permitting women to serve as ministers, elders, and deacons would unseat men from those positions moreover, that it is against the spirit of the Apostle Paul to struggle for power. Finally, there is no biblical basis for women to hold office in the church" (Folkert, 1969)

There was a great deal of opposition and resistance, from the fear that allowing women to be ordained would somehow limit men's opportunities to a sense of outrage fueled by biblical literalism. Despite this, the denomination decided on ordination when a Classis in the Northeast opened the door by ordaining Joyce Stedje to the ministry of Word and Sacrament in 1973 (Mulder, 1989). By 1979, the denomination had voted to include women in the ministry of Word and Sacrament. Still, it allowed for resistance to women's ordination by codifying a conscience clause in the Book of Church Order, allowing individuals and individual churches to determine if they would support the ordination of women based on a personal interpretation of scripture.

Details on the history of women in ministry are found in Lynn Japinga's book *Loyalty and Loss: The Reformed Church in America, 1945-1994*, and *Patterns and Portraits: Women in the History of the Reformed Church in America*, edited by Renee House and John Coakley. I will give a quick overview highlighting the resistance to women in church leadership.

In 1972, after fifty-four years of debate, the General Synod (1972) declared that women could be ordained to the offices of elder and deacon, yet three years later, there was no clear path for women to be ordained to ministry. In response to this delay, the faculty and students of New Brunswick Theological Seminary (Faculty and Students of NBTS, 1975) sent a letter to the General Synod raising concern over the failure of the amendment to the Book of Church Order for the ordination of women (. They requested a resubmission. In response, the Rev. Roy Ackerman registered his disapproval, stating that the biblical and theological views of the faculty were inconsistent with "reformed interpretation" and with "orthodox Christianity" (Ackerman, 1975)

The inclusion of women in ordination to minister of Word in 1979 (General Synod, 1979). Still, it was quickly followed the next year with a clause allowing those who did not believe in the ordination of women to ministry to opt out based on conscience. Thus, the acceptance of the ordination of women to the ministry continued to meet resistance and allowed individuals to avoid supporting women who were called to the ministry.

In 1983, in his President's Report to General Synod (1983), James I Cook advocated for the full acceptance of women in ministry from churches. He highlighted barriers to women's ordination and resistance to their leadership. He stated, "Congregations have sent their daughters to NBTS and Western but have been less willing to receive them back as ministers of the Word. It is little wonder that these candidates often experience feelings of frustration, rejection, anger, and despair."

Four years later, in 1987, the General Synod (1987) discussed a quota for women delegates, but that overture failed. Later that year, the Church Herald published an article by Robert Wise entitled "Who Speaks for the 53 Percent Minority." In that article, Robert Wise noted that "representative inclusion of women in the judicatories of the church is a basic, fundamental right" (Wise, 1987). However, resistance to women in ministry was recorded in letters to the editor of the Church Herald in response to this article. Calvin Heyenga stated, "God's word tells us clearly that women are not to be pastor or consistory person, we must abide

by his word... True, a female pastor or consistory person is not inconsistent with the Book of Church Order, but it is inconsistent with God's order of things" (Heyenga, 1987). The Rev. Russell E. Horton wrote, "If indeed the Bible does not allow the ordination of women (much as we love them and their God-given roles in the church), it only logically follows that the synod may be "constitutionally" but "unbiblically" constructed" (Horton, 1987).

The General Synod of 1988 reported increased participation of women at Synod (1988). Still, there was concern about network support, education for churches on women in ministry, and a lack of denominational-level staff representation and support.

Later that year, the NBTS faculty responded to an inquiry by the General Secretary of the RCA, Dr. Edwin Mulder, concerning women in ministry. The response included grave concern over regional resistance to women in church leadership and denying opportunities for women. In addition, the seminary faculty advocated for "better efforts to support women seeking significant opportunities for ministry and in pushing the church to make such positions available" (White, 1988).

In 1989, John Coakley wrote an article in the Church Herald concerning the tradition of women exercising authority and influence in the church (Coakley, 1989). L'Anni Hill Alto and Joyce Borgman DeVelder wrote about their contested ordinations in that same issue. Both women talked about the support they received from their seminaries and families. Both dealt with resistance from other ministers and the denomination but received help and support from strong allies. L'Anni wrote, "The first years were not easy, living in a fishbowl and trying to prove people wrong about women in ministry. (Alto, 1989)" Joyce talked about the "ever-present undertow of criticism and self-doubt..." (deVelder, 1989).

Five years later, in 1994, the General Synod (1994) instructed the Commission for Women to develop questions to evaluate the treatment of women students in RCA seminaries. In the Commission's 1995 report to the General Synod (1995), they highlighted that many RCA congregations were unwilling to acknowledge the call of women to church leadership. In addition, almost every woman questioned had at "one time or another experienced sexism or sexual harassment" (Minutes of the General Synod, 1995). In addition, many of the women had been turned down by church search committees because they were women. The Commission identified that women faced a lack of support from the denomination; another was a lack of opportunity (Minutes of the General Synod, 1995).

By 1995, only two women held senior pastor positions. Moreover, it was clear that in a “good old boy” network, men had opportunities that women did not have. The report indicated that women started with a lower salary, served struggling congregations, or were a bonus add-on for a male pastor’s call, a two-for-one package. That year, the Commission recommended that the RCA work towards fuller inclusion of women in all offices of the church and instructed that RCA seminaries and the Theological Education Agency study, review, and distribute “A Code of Sexual Ethics” from the Report of the General Synod Council’s Ministry and Personnel Services Committee (Minutes of the General Synod, 1995).

### **We Are Speaking**

Over twenty years later, in 2016, a survey conducted by the RCA’s Commission for Women and Office of Women’s Transformation & Leadership indicated that clergywomen were still being harassed or abused by male clergy or congregational members. Training and attempts at inclusion had not produced the desired results in the church. The election of openly sexist and abusive political leaders in 2016 whom Evangelical Church pastors and leaders supported became a breaking point for women who had kept silent or felt silenced by the church (RCA, 2016).

The “MeToo” movement initiated in 2006 went viral in 2017 when women started to speak up about sexual violence and posted statements using the #MeToo hashtag. That same year, Emily Joy Allison launched the #ChurchToo movement, focusing on sexual assault, harassment, and abuse in the church. In response, many mainline denominations developed statements decrying the abuse of women by church leaders and church members. In 2018, the RCA developed a statement condemning the sexual abuse of women in the church and ending a culture of silence (RCA, n.d.). However, the culture of pain and silence has continued.

In my research with clergywomen in the RCA, the women highlighted positive encouragement and adverse treatment. On the positive side, role models and a strong support network helped them discern and follow their call to ministry. However, barriers to full acceptance as leaders were messaged by denominational staff and church members stating they believed in and supported the traditional role of women. Many experienced male religious leaders who refused to acknowledge them as called church leaders and colleagues. Some had

been told to go back to work in the kitchen or with children. All experienced some form of sexual harassment and even abuse from fellow clergy and church members.

The stories of the first women ordained in the RCA and the stories of women today have not changed much. Women still experience barriers to leadership positions, gender bias, discrimination, and sexual harassment and assault. However, they persevere because of a strong sense of call, the joy of ministry, and the support of friends and family.

### **We Will Continue Speaking**

We cannot stop speaking. We must honor the legacy of the women who came before us, our legacy, and work for the women who will come after us. We need to speak out to work towards securing a safe and life-giving place for women who are called to teach and preach the Gospel and to lead in the church.

My research indicates many ways to support and strengthen the voice of women in the church and mitigate resistance. Based on my research and study, I recommend four:

1. To provide support for survivors of sexual harassment and abuse
2. To develop training for church leaders, seminary staff and students, and denominational leaders to end gender bias and prevent sexual harassment and abuse
3. To develop support programs for women in leadership to move us from surviving to thriving
4. To increase the number of women in key leadership roles

### **Support for Survivors**

We will start with support for the survivors. Jesus provided social, emotional, spiritual, and physical healing in his healing ministry. As his followers, we should do the same. Even though denominations, like the RCA, have written statements acknowledging and apologizing for the abuse, there is little support available to help the survivors of abuse.

Support and care for the survivors and developing programs of accountability for the perpetrators and the enablers related to providing for survivors' well-being will help those unable to speak out (Scarsella & Krehbiel, 2019).

## **Develop Training**

In my study, participants indicated that either they or another female student experienced gender bias or stereotyping by male students and male faculty at the seminary. Research has found that seminaries and churches can help women clergy by providing diversity, equity, and inclusion training that prevents gender bias and stereotyping (Adams & Bloom, 2017; Ambrose et al., 2010; Gaddes et al., 2016; Harp et al., 2011; Joynt, 2019; Lemoine et al., 2016; Logan, 2018; Ryan et al., 2016). Courses on gender bias and diversity can help move male clergy and churches toward accepting women in church leadership and support clergywomen in their work (Lyons, 2013).

This training should include training on gender stereotyping (Adams, 2007; Bartkowski & Hempel, 2009; Sarot, 2011; Shehan et al., 1999), Scripture and gender (Banerjee, 2000; Sarot, 2011), sexual harassment (Amoah et al., 2015; Andriot & Coe, 2020), and agentic leadership styles (Hoyt, 2017; Northouse, 2019; Perl, 2002). Inclusion requires going beyond hiring a diverse workforce, including developing and retaining women and minorities through inclusive leadership practices (Sabharwal, 2014).

## **Supportive Programs for Women**

The RCA should [encourage Classes to] create intentional support networks and training opportunities to support clergywomen and to increase job satisfaction and retention. The participants in my study indicated that support networks, mentoring programs, and leadership training helped them in their decision to remain in the church as religious leaders. A support network provides clergywomen with an outlet to share stories about gender bias, talk about stressors, and gain encouragement from one another.

In addition, the RCA needs to [help create and] provide supportive mentors to women and minorities to help promote them to higher leadership levels, including senior positions at larger churches and executive-level denominational positions (Campbell-Reed, 2019; Segal et al., 2016). The Regional Synod of Albany has developed a mentoring and training program for new clergy that some participants found aided their success and retention in ministry. Encouraging Classes to adopt a mentoring program based on the Regional Synod of Albany's program could increase the success and retention of all pastors.

## **Place Women in Key Leadership Roles**

Many clergywomen indicate that role models who like them helped them decide to be ministers in a church. The lack of role models in key leadership roles gave some women the sense that the denomination was unwilling to support clergywomen or deal with gender bias. Having women as role models provides clergywomen with someone they can learn from as they observe their leadership. (Alvinus et al., 2018).

A numerical goal for the number of women in church leadership positions, including seminary professorships, should be established to implement a strategic diversity plan (Longman & Lafreniere, 2012).

Increasing the number of women in leadership roles does not solve all challenges related to gender bias and gender barriers. Still, it should facilitate women's ability to provide diverse gifts to manage leadership challenges and create role models for future leaders (Longman & Lafreniere, 2012).

## **Conclusion**

The resistance to the full inclusion of women in leadership roles in the church has been documented for years. More painful than barriers and broken promises is the allowance of bullying, belittling, sexual harassment, and sexual assault. We should not allow this to continue. As we enter an uncertain political time, let us stand with Jesus, who treated everyone with dignity, sought to bring outsiders into the community, and healed us from our brokenness. Let us follow Christ's lead into the future, speaking for the voiceless and bringing the light of the Kingdom of God into the shadowy places in this world. Let us hear the voices, speak up, and speak out. We can be silent no longer. We are speaking, and we will continue to speak!

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