

# Women clergy: Steps forward and back: Polarization of liberal and conservative groups noted

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As women in mainline Protestant denominations rejoice over decades of ordination—United Methodists and Presbyterians this year celebrated 50 years of women ministers and Episcopalians the 30th anniversary of women priests—conservatives continue to argue that the pulpit is not an appropriate place for them.

Many took pride in recent landmark choices for prominent leadership roles for ordained female clergy; namely, Sharon Watkins, who was elected president of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), and Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori, who will be consecrated November 4 as the first woman presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church.

Adair Lummis, a sociologist of religion and an expert on women clergy at Hartford Seminary in Connecticut, applauds the new steps by mainline Protestant churches. But she offers a “don’t just relax” caution.

“Just because you have more women and you’re having these milestone celebrations, please remember that in some denominations . . . there were more women ordained 50 years ago than there are now,” she said.

In *Clergy Women: An Uphill Calling*, Lummis and her coauthors cite changes in denominations like the Church of the Nazarene, whose percentage of women clergy decreased from 20 percent in 1908 to 6 percent in 1973. That figure stands at 8.5 percent today.

In the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel, a Pentecostal denomination founded in 1927 by Aimee Semple McPherson, 36 percent of the clergy are female. Thirty years ago nearly half of Foursquare clergy were women, and there were even

greater percentages at the beginning.

Ron Williams, Foursquare spokesperson and church historian, attributes the change in part to the growing focus on different roles for men and women in some evangelical circles.

Once women are ordained, they may still face resistance in many big congregations. "For the larger churches, the better-paying churches, they want a man in the pastorate," Lummis said. "This is a problem."

In Southern Baptist circles, opposition to women clergy is particularly intense. R. Albert Mohler Jr., president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, and Frank Page, president of the Southern Baptist Convention, supported women's ordination in the early 1980s before the fundamentalist resurgence began changing the makeup of SBC seminaries. But they now stand behind the 2000 version of their denomination's faith statement, which declares that "while both men and women are gifted for service in the church, the office of pastor is limited to men as qualified by scripture."

The polarization between liberal and conservative camps in church life may be a major factor, noted a conservative evangelical figure. "There's an increasing realization that there's a connection between the ordination of women and more liberal views of the authority of scripture," said Wayne Grudem, a Phoenix Seminary professor and author of *Evangelical Feminism: A New Path to Liberalism?*

"In that sense," added Grudem, "leaders in the conservative groups think that the survival of the denomination as a Bible-believing group is at stake in this issue ultimately." -*Religion News Service*