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Ashley M. Wilcox

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DANGEROUS WOMEN'S BODIES
STORIES OF HOW WOMEN MINISTERS ARE
THREATENING AND THREATENED

by

Ashley M. Wilcox

Thesis Adviser: Dr. Luke Timothy Johnson

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Introduction

“I will begin where feminists typically begin, in the complex and messy soil of experience, where these questions emerge not merely as intellectual exercises but as struggles of the whole self; that is to say, we experience them in our bodies, our hearts, and our minds.”¹

As a woman in ministry, I hear stories from other women ministers all the time. Stories about their struggles with how to dress and how to present themselves. Stories about the inappropriate comments they receive from parishioners, colleagues, and supervisors. Stories about how they do not feel safe within their own churches. I also hear stories about their triumphs—how God is working in and through them in their ministries. When I tell other women in ministry that I am working on a thesis on women ministers’ bodies and how they are seen as threatening and threatened, their eyes light up and they say, “Have I got a story for you.”

But not everyone hears these stories. Women tell each other their stories in hallways and back rooms, usually outside the presence of men. Men in ministry are often surprised and appalled when they hear the stories. They had no idea about the difficulties their colleagues are navigating on a daily basis. In addition, there are many women beginning to feel a call to ministry. According to statistics from The Association of Theological Schools, women constituted 32.4% of all people enrolled in theological schools in the United States in 2014-15.² These women may not know the challenges that lie ahead.

This discomfort with women ministers’ bodies is not a new phenomenon in the Christian church. In I Corinthians 11:5, Paul states that women must cover their heads to pray and prophesy. An example in the early church occurs in *The Acts of Thecla*, when Thecla, an

¹ Kathleen D. Billman, “Pastoral Care as an Art of Community,” in *The Arts of Ministry: Feminist Womanist Approaches*, ed. Christie Cozad Nueger (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 11.

² The Association of Theological Schools, “2014-2015 Annual Data Tables,” 36, accessed March 11, 2016, <http://www.ats.edu/uploads/resources/institutional-data/annual-data-tables/2014-2015-annual-data-tables.pdf>.

exemplary virgin who wished to share the gospel, was repeatedly threatened with death when she refused to marry her suitors. Even Paul said to Thecla in verse 25, “The time is shameful and you are beautiful; another temptation may overtake you worse than the first, and you may not be able to endure but behave like a cowardly man.”³ Unlike men who felt called to preach at that time, the focus for Thecla was on her physical attractiveness and how that made her vulnerable.

A more modern example of the kinds of scrutiny women in ministry face is Aimee Semple McPherson, an early 20th century evangelist and celebrity, who founded the Foursquare Church. Her obituary in the LA Times describes the clothing she wore to preach, “wearing a large cross about her neck and in flowing white robes,” and recounted her sermon as climaxing in the call to the altar.⁴ The obituary goes on to list her marriages and that she was subject to 45 lawsuits.⁵

These concerns about women’s bodies as threatening are not unique to women in ministry. In the Christian tradition, “women often struggle with a deep sense of their female bodies as ‘shameful’ and their sexuality as ‘depraved.’ These feelings reflect age-old binary patterns of thinking that posit women as defiled, impure, and deficient and men as pure, healthy, and sufficient.”⁶ But this traditional binary is compounded for women ministers, who take on a traditionally male role. As the exclusive leaders in the church for centuries, the male body has

³ Bart Ehrman, trans., “The Acts of Thecla,” in *Lost Scriptures: Books That Did Not Make it into the New Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 119.

⁴ “Aimee Semple McPherson Dies Suddenly in Oakland,” *LA Times*, September 28, 1944. Accessed March 14, 2016, <http://www.latimes.com/local/obituaries/archives/la-me-aimee-semble-mcpherson-19440928-story.html>.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Serene Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology: Cartographies of Grace* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 120.

become the default body. Women in ministry have to determine how to present their bodies in a way that will command respect, but not draw threatening attention.

In this project, I have collected the stories of women ministers talking about their bodies. I focus on firsthand testimony, in the present, of women ministers primarily in the United States. I do so because firsthand witness is powerful and these stories illustrate the problems that contemporary women in ministry face. These narratives are convicting.

I collected these stories through an online survey of ten questions. The first nine questions asked about the woman's identity and demographic information (name, age, race, sexual orientation, gender identity), denomination, and ministry setting. The final question asked the woman to share a story about her body in ministry. Over 300 women started the survey, and I received 179 completed responses. The ministers who completed the survey range in age from 24 to 73. They are predominantly white, almost all Christian, and the majority are heterosexual, cisgender women. I recognize that these respondents are among the most educated, wealthiest, and most comfortable people in the world; in some ways, that makes their stories all the more powerful. If these women are experiencing the kinds of threats they shared, how much more women who have less privilege and access?

I am sharing the stories of these women, with their names changed, as they shared them with me. These stories are illustrative, not definitive. It would be impossible to take one person's story—or even a couple hundred stories—and say that it represents the condition of women ministers today. I also recognize the ways that identities intersect to make experiences different for people of color and queer people: the experience of a cisgender African-American woman working in a large, urban church will necessarily be different from a white, gender-

nonconforming hospital chaplain. Rather than paint one picture, I hope that putting these stories side by side will illustrate the complexity of the challenges that women in ministry face today.

In the first section, I share stories telling about how women ministers' bodies are perceived as threatening, including how they do not fit the expectations of a pastor, how their pregnancies seem threatening, and how they are threatening in singleness and sexuality. In the second section, I concentrate on stories women shared about clothing, where anxieties about the female body in ministry play out. This section also addresses the question of why women do not just cover their bodies. For many, a robe is the solution to constant comments about their appearance, but it does not work for women in denominations that traditionally do not use robes. The third section contains stories about the ways women ministers are threatened, physically and emotionally, in their work. In the fourth section, I focus on stories about how women can integrate their bodies into their ministry, as the Holy Spirit moves through their bodies and they provide an example for others of embodied ministry.

When I began this project, I was working with the assumption that women in ministry face particular challenges because they are women, especially related to their appearance and sexual vulnerability. The stories I received confirmed that speculation far more than I ever expected. In sharing these stories, my goal is to bear witness to how God is working through these women in ministry and the ways that God's work in the world is potentially blocked in the struggles these women face.

I. Women Ministers as Threatening

“What I hear often (at least once a week) is, ‘You don’t look like a pastor!’”

The stories I received from women ministers demonstrated many of the ways that people find women ministers’ bodies threatening. Some comments seem innocuous, merely saying that these women look different from what the parishioners expected—that their bodies do not fit the mold of a pastor. Other women shared stories of how people, both within congregations and their peers, respond differently to them than their male colleagues. Seminary can be isolating for women whose male classmates feel threatened by their bodies and spending time alone with them. Women going through the ordination process face invasive questions and double standards with regard to celibacy. In particular, single women in ministry are seen as a threat. There is strong pressure for clergy to marry, but that creates its own challenges. And finally, the possibility of pregnancy raises many concerns for both parishioners and ministers.

A. “You Don’t Look Like a Pastor”

The phrase “you don’t look like a pastor” sums up so much of the experience of many women ministers. The quote comes from Monica, the 27-year-old pastor of a Quaker church. She said that the “you don’t look like a pastor” comments always leave her wondering “What is it about me that doesn’t look pastoral? Apparently, all of me.” The traditional, male image of a pastor does not fit for this young woman. Similarly, Dawn, 57, a pastor in the Presbyterian Church (USA) heard, “You don’t look like any pastor I’ve ever seen.” Gwen, 60, the pastor of a mid-size, progressive UCC congregation in a small town, said that she had a parishioner in her first calling who always referred to her as a “dis-staff member.” She said, “It took me a while before I realized he was referring to the fact that I don’t have male genitalia.” These women’s

bodies do not fit the idea that many people have of what a pastor should look like, to the point that parishioners feel the need to comment on it.

It is not only that people do not associate women with the pastoral role, sometimes they actively seek out a man to fill that role. Alison, 42, the pastor of an ELCA Lutheran church in a small town, said there was a lot of confusion in the community about who she was, because she wears a collar but is a woman. She also said she has noticed that if there is a male clergy person in a collar, people will most often approach him for answers, even if she answers the question. She said, “It often feels like they need validation from a man.”

Many of the ministers who responded to the survey recounted stories of being the first female pastor to serve their church, or the first ordained woman someone had met. They have received questions about whether they are allowed to marry and have children. Danielle, the pastor of a small, suburban church in the Presbyterian Church (USA) said that people take liberties with female pastors that they would not take with her male colleagues. For example, parishioners tell her she looks “lovely” today, and an elder once referred to her as “our lovely pastor.” She noted that a man would never be called “handsome” during the liturgy.

Women shared stories of not being treated with the same respect as their male colleagues. For example, Rebecca, a 24-year-old Lutheran pastor, told a story about how, after she was done preaching, an older white man came up to her and said, “Nice story, sweetie.” She had seen the same man saying things like “Thank you, pastor, for that nice sermon” to male preachers in previous weeks. She was frustrated that, according to this man, she was not worthy of the title pastor and her work was not worthy of the title sermon because of her age and gender.

Working with male clergy sometimes proves tricky as well. Megan, a High Priest and minister for the Community of Christ, had a male co-worker who was clearly uncomfortable

working with a smart woman who outranked him. He started off by making a lot of bad, sexist jokes. She said she leaned in, looked him straight in the eye, and asked, “Do you really want to go there with me, Chris?” He did not, and he never made jokes like that again. Megan commented that sometimes with male ministers, there seems to be a moment of testing the boundaries, to see what she will put up with.

B. Isolation

This unfamiliarity and discomfort with women ministers can be a way to cover how people see women ministers as threatening. It can also result in female ministers feeling unwelcome and isolated. For example, Cynthia, a 36-year-old UCC minister, shared how isolated she felt in seminary. When groups of students would travel to a meeting place for lunch or drinks, most of the men refused to ride alone in a car with her. Unless she could recruit more than one man to ride in her car, she would ride alone and the men would all ride together. She said that one man felt comfortable riding with her, but the others thought that his willingness to build relationships with women in the program was inappropriate. It was like the men were afraid of making connections with the women “for fear that they would slip into unholiness.” There were only six women in Cynthia’s program, so this behavior was very isolating.

Other women said that this feeling of isolation continued in their male-dominated pastoral settings. One said that when she stood up to the “boys’ club,” they resigned and have since tried to sabotage events. Another said that the male clergy around her attempt to ignore her. Peggy, 57, an Episcopal rector in a rural church, said that the male leaders of churches in her area do not welcome women in their meetings. The first time she attended, she wore a collar. The men there said they were not sure whether she was a priest or if the collar was a fashion statement. In addition, women clergy are not welcome to the Ministerial Alliance there.

Some of these responses vary by denomination. Elizabeth, a university chaplain from the Church of Christ said, “As a woman who preaches and leads in a denomination that has not traditionally included women in leadership, I have been asked to leave elder meetings while men colleagues have stayed, to preach with men rather than on my own.” She stated that one of the most difficult aspects for her has been the lack of eye contact from men during meetings, when her male colleagues receive eye contact. She noted that it is almost comical at times that her body and her self cannot be seen or acknowledged by some men. She sees this as significant and a barrier to her success in ministry. Like the other stories, this one illustrates how anxiety about women ministers’ bodies leads to isolation and consequently hinders ministry.

C. Challenges in Ordination

Women ministers face particular challenges in the ordination process, and the kinds of questions they receive reveal anxieties about women’s bodies. Mary, now 46, was in her early 30s when she began the ordination process in the PC(USA). The ordination committee assumed that she was not heterosexual and were hostile and silent. Five years later, she married a man, and the (mostly male) committee asked why her marriage had not factored into her faith statement. She felt that, ultimately, they were asking her why she “wouldn’t mediate and defend myself through men and maleness.” When Barbara, 63, was screened for Episcopal ordination by her judiciary, she was asked why she was not married. She was 24 at the time. Before she could answer, another person spoke up and said she was not required to answer that question. Both of the speakers were older men who were ordained ministers.

While questions about marriage may apply equally to men and women going through the ordination process, other questions about celibacy put a disproportionate burden on women. Adele, 27, an ELCA seminarian, said that her denomination has a policy that all seminarians and

ordained ministers are required to sign. The policy states, “Single ordained ministers are expected to live a chaste life, holy in body and spirit, honoring the single life, and working for the good of all.”⁷ Adele pointed out that “The only person who could undeniably be accused of going against this is a woman who gets pregnant,” and she finds that irritating.

Hannah, 25, a United Methodist seminarian said that her process of ordination in the United Methodist church includes invasive questioning process on medical forms and in essays, including questions about pap smears, STDs, HIV status, and blood work. She said that these forms “essentially encourage lying to one’s physician about sensitive issues” because they have to be submitted to the United Methodist church in their entirety, and they require more invasive information from women than men. The essay questions for ordination include a question that asks for one’s understanding of upholding “celibacy in singleness and fidelity in marriage.” She said that it is nearly impossible to respond to this question without lying about herself and her beliefs: “Having personally had one pregnancy scare, it has occurred to me that, should I become pregnant unintentionally and outside of marriage, my church would no longer ordain me. However, a man entering ministry would not have to face such scrutiny.” She said that she might consider having an abortion if that were to happen, “something no woman should feel forced into doing.”

Women also faced challenges in ordination due to their weight. For example, Lydia, 33, said that during the ordination process with the Episcopal church, she was most concerned about whether she would be put forward because of her sexual orientation as a lesbian, but it became clear early on that “the bigger hurdle I would be facing was around my weight.” She was told that her weight and sexual orientation must be correlated with sexual abuse that she had

⁷ The Church Council of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, “Vision and Expectations: Ordained Ministers in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America” (April 2010), 11, accessed March 25, 2016, <http://www.lutherancore.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/Vision-and-Expectations-Ordained-Ministers-041010.pdf>.

experienced but had not disclosed, a false assumption based on her identity and size. After an all-day interview in which no one mentioned her weight, she received a letter outlining their concerns about her weight. In various ways, these ordination committees are all trying to control women's bodies. Either by trying to limit their sexuality or suggesting that they take up less space, the committees demonstrate that they find the women ministers' bodies threatening as they are.

D. Singleness as Threatening

Many of the respondents shared stories about how their singleness has been seen as threatening. Dana, a minister in the PC(USA), said that, as a single woman, "there was always a shroud of silence around my sexuality." The church was not a place she could bring partners, for fear that people would ask personal question. She said that she understands the need to be appropriate and have professional discretion, but at times that discretion felt more like hiding. She said that unmarried sexuality seems dangerous to the church in a way that married sexuality does not. She mourns that there never seems to be room for discussion about what it means to be whole, embodied, sexual people.

One way to control these single women is to try to get them to marry. Women ministers said they feel pressure to marry, like the 25-year-old Lutheran pastoral intern who has received questions and comments like "You haven't met anyone yet?" and "Maybe you're allergic to men." Women shared stories about church members trying to play matchmaker for single ministers or making suggestions to avoiding certain people or places. A Methodist pastor was asked if she was a lesbian because she was "still" single at 26. Christine, who is 56 and the first woman pastor in a progressive UCC church, said that she has received many inappropriate and condescending comments about being single and childless. She said that congregants had the

idea that because she did not have a “family,” she should be available to the church whenever she was needed, and it has been difficult to try to maintain boundaries.

Single women in ministry have to be especially careful that their behavior appears appropriate. Some women shared stories about having supervisors who thought their behavior as a single person was inappropriate. Angela, 28, who works in a black UCC church, shared a story about her sister visiting:

One night before the Bible study started, she was showing me some pictures of some of our family members on her phone, people I hadn’t seen in a while. My head was on her shoulder. After the Bible study, my pastor at the time pulled me aside and pulled aside one of my friends (a man), sat on the couch, imitated my interaction with my sister, and then asked me what it looked like. I was furious because I immediately knew what he meant.

Angela said she was afraid from that point on.

Catherine, 33, shared a similar story about something that occurred when during her seminary field education in a large inner city church. One evening, Joe, a single man, stopped by while she was preparing for Sunday morning. He had questions about faith, and they had a good discussion. The following morning, the senior pastor called her into the office and lectured her about scheduling meetings with single men of the church at night. Someone from the church had driven past and recognized their cars. She tried to tell the pastor that nothing had happened, but she was given a strong warning to stay away from Joe. Joe was also contacted by the senior pastor and never returned to that church.

Women also told stories of the difficulties they encountered dating, both from uncomfortable supervisors and the people that they wanted to date. Carrie, a retired UCC minister who worked predominantly in the UMC, said that her senior pastor said that he was supportive of women in ministry, but in reality he was very uncomfortable with the idea. He had trouble especially with single women in ministry, and on many occasions tried to curtail or stop

any dating or social activity. He told the women on his pastoral staff that “people in the congregation were uncomfortable with the notion that pastors have personal lives.”

Dianna, 35, the founding pastor of a Lutheran church plant, said that she has found dating next to impossible. She said that men seem to keep their distance from her and either appear intimidated or put her on a pedestal because of her position. She said that she has seen men physically step back from her in a bar when she told them what she does. Estee, 57, a minister in a Pentecostal mega church, said that being a single pastor is frowned upon and the pressure to marry for the sake of ministry is real, but men are often threatened by women in ministry. She said women in ministry are viewed as off-limits and nonsexual, and expressions of sexuality are not allowed for women ministers.

Lesley, 46, a UCC pastor working in sustainable justice, experienced this discomfort with single women pastors in a painful way when her partner of ten years left her while she was serving a local congregation as a pastor. She said, “I was suddenly seen as a simultaneous threat and object.” She started receiving anonymous letters from a parishioner commenting on her looks and another parishioner asked her out several times. At the same time, some in the congregation began questioning whether her friendships in the congregation were appropriate. One person accused her of inappropriate boundaries. Lesley found that what had been appropriate as a married person suddenly was not as a single person.

E. Relationships and Marriage

Being in a relationship as a woman in ministry is also fraught. Women shared stories about struggling with appearances in their relationships and feeling like they had to hide their sexuality. Sarah, 32, the solo pastor of a PC(USA) church, began dating a man who lived two hours away when she was living in the parsonage. He would visit her and stay in a spare

bedroom. “Church members noticed his car in my driveway overnight and made comments about how they thought it was improper.” They are now married. Brenda, 59, a part-time pastor of a suburban UCC church, was living in a parsonage when she was dating her husband. The congregation was conservative, and she knew that they expected that she would not have sex before marriage. She said that put a lot of stress on their relationship, to the point that they ended up getting married sooner than they probably would have if she had not been a pastor. Jennifer, 33, the solo pastor of a small suburban Presbyterian congregation, said that one of the biggest struggles was the decision to live with her husband before they were married. She likes to be transparent, and it was hard for her to feel like she had a secret. She intentionally was sexually active before marriage, which she says was an important decision for her. She commented, “I wish this area of my life was one I could talk about more.”

Jade, 24, a student pastor of a large, urban United Methodist church, said that as soon as she got engaged, everyone seemed to have questions and opinions. She said, “When my engagement became public, people realized that I am a human being and that I, too, am a sexual being. It seems that people did not think I was capable of any sexual desires.” It seemed to her that, as soon as the ring appeared, sex and gender came to the forefront. June, 35, the pastor of a PC(USA) church, said that when she was getting ready to be married, congregation members gave her advice about her wedding night and what to expect for her first sexual experience. While it was her first time, it was embarrassing to have women in their seventies try to tell her how to douche after sex. She was grateful that they did not follow up after the honeymoon.

Women who married while working as pastors found that expectations changed with marriage. Several commented on the focus on their husbands after marriage. Andrea, 47, the solo pastor of a Disciples of Christ church, said that she had been single in ministry for ten years,

but when she married, expectations were different. Her husband had conversations with a couple of men in the church who felt that he needed to do something to “straighten her out.” Now that she had a husband, they thought that things would be different. Gail, 63, the solo pastor of a medium sized urban/suburban PC(USA) church, had a similar experience: “Shortly after beginning my current call, my husband received a phone call from a male member of the Properties Committee who berated him for not keeping me in line, asking how he could live with himself married to such a cold, lesbian bitch.” The caller said that, as a woman, Gail should stick to things she knows about and not bother herself with matters of finance or facilities management. Michelle, 44, the part-time pastor of a small, rural Disciples of Christ congregation, said that her situation as a married woman and a stepmother is a recurring topic both within her congregation and the Commission on ministry. They are concerned about how her husband and stepchildren “get along” when she is away from home, because the church she serves is four hours away. It seems unlikely that a church would have similar concerns about a male minister who married and had stepchildren.

F. Pregnancy

One area that seemed to cause a lot of anxiety among parishioners that is specific to women is concerns about pregnancy. Church members brought up pregnancy frequently in their conversations with young, female ministers. Kelsey, 26, the solo pastor of a United Methodist Church, said that she has done five infant baptisms in her 18 months as a pastor. After each one, when she is walking the baby around the congregation, someone has said something like, “Wow, you’re a natural,” or “You’ll be such a good mom someday. It is frustrating to her, as a single clergy woman, that initiating a child into the church moves people to focus on her body that has not given birth, rather than the child in her arms that they have covenanted to nurture in faith.

Other women shared comments they had received like, “Are you pregnant?” “You’re not going to get pregnant, are you?” and “Just don’t get pregnant anytime soon. We can’t keep paying you if you do.” Questions like these show the anxiety that parishioners have about women’s bodies and how they see the possibility of pregnancy as threatening.

Brittany, 36, pastor of a United Methodist church in a small town, said that at her first appointment, when she was pregnant, a man in her church said that he felt uncomfortable with a pastor who was pregnant because it made him think about the pastor having sex. Amanda, 40, was pregnant while working as a hospital chaplain. She was concerned that her obvious pregnancy would be a distraction or a source of discomfort for her or the patients and staff: “I had brought pretty clear evidence that I had a personal life into the room with me.” While she found that her pregnancy did come up in almost every visit, it seemed like the patients were more surprised and curious than anything else. She thought this was because the classic image of a minister is still a white, male, unmarried priest for many people, perhaps even for her.

II. Clothing

“Every aspect of my appearance has been commented on. I wear robes for theological reasons but also to cover my body and clothes. The comments now center on my hair and shoes. This is embodied ministry in a way I never expected or agreed to.”

When I asked women in ministry to share stories about their bodies, what they talked about most was clothing. Clothes are where anxieties about the female body in ministry play out. It seems that, regardless of what women choose to wear while doing ministry, others feel free to comment on their appearance. The comments these ministers have received illustrate how women ministers’ bodies are seen as both threatening and threatened, and both result in women feeling the need to cover themselves. One solution many women have found is to wear

robes. However, that is not an option in every tradition and, as the quote above demonstrates, it does not stop the endless comments about women ministers' appearance.

A. Comments from Supervisors

Some of the comments about clothing came from supervisors, who felt that the clothes a minister chose to wear were unsuitable for the work. Catherine, 33, who did her fieldwork in a large, inner city church, was called into the office one Sunday by the senior pastor. He said that she needed to go home and change her clothes. She was wearing a red print skirt and top with red shoes. The pastor said that the red would "remind the congregation of the fact that I had monthly periods, and the only blood they should think about was the blood of Christ."

While banning the color red from a minister's wardrobe might seem a little ridiculous, women have had supervisors with more serious concerns about clothing being too revealing or insufficiently formal. Olivia, 43, a pastor of a Quaker church, shared that once a clergywoman threatened to not let her help with the service if she did not change her clothes. She was wearing a black dress that did not reach her knees and black leggings. Sophia, 46, a Disciples of Christ pastor, said that once when she was a student preacher, two leaders in the congregation asked her if she wanted a robe. She said no and thought it was strange, but learned afterward that the leaders both thought she was not dressed formally enough.

Even compliments on clothing from supervisors can feel awkward and competitive. Aubrey, 40, is an associate pastor in a large United Methodist church. She said that her senior pastor often makes comments about how she looks like she just came "off a runway in New York City" on Sunday mornings. One Sunday when she "dressed down," he announced to the congregation that he was trying to compete with her by wearing a suit. He also gives her fashion

magazines. Although these might seem like compliments, constant focus on a minister's clothes and fashion can be distracting from more important things in ministry.

B. Comments from Parishioners

Comments on clothing from parishioners also range from funny to threatening. Emma, 38, is the solo pastor of a UCC church, and she usually wears a robe to preach. One day, when the scriptures lent themselves to a sermon on how clothes do not make the disciple, she chose to wear jeans and a t-shirt instead of her robe. Ironically, after she finished her sermon, an 80-year-old man from the congregation said, "Your jeans should fit better. Those sag around your rear end."

Leah, 29, is also a solo pastor of a Congregational church. Early in her ministry, she noticed that some of the other young women felt pressure to dress modestly, but she dressed in her own way, regularly wearing leggings and boots, with bright colors and large jewelry. One day, she overheard a conversation between women in her congregation about "the pastor's sexiness." The women debated whether her appearance would draw new member or chase them away. Leah said, "I felt incredibly exposed and self-conscious. It changed how comfortable I felt in front of my congregation. I began to carefully consider what my body and appearance conveyed."

Some of the comments from parishioners seem like subtle (and not-so-subtle) ways to control women ministers' bodies. Mia, 33, is an ELCA hospital chaplain. Once, while she was preaching, she was told that her dress pants were too tight and distracting for parishioners. She was behind a pulpit. Ministers are complimented on clothing that parishioners think is appropriate and warned away from clothing that they think is not. Charlotte, 48, an Episcopal priest, said that she received compliments for clothing that was conservative, even though her

clergy collared shirt was always the base layer. Parishioners made disparaging comments when she wore Birkenstock sandals or cropped pants. Evelyn, 27, an associate pastor in a suburban, United Methodist church said that older people in the congregation comment that her attire is “sexy.” She says this feels like a cross between a compliment and passive-aggressive disapproval.

Again, even comments that seem complimentary can make women in ministry feel uncomfortable. Abigail, 50, a United Reform Church pastor said that when she was training to be a minister, a parishioner came up to her and said, “You always dress appropriately for the occasion.” It upset Abigail that the parishioner was thinking about what she was wearing instead of what she was doing or saying. Now, she dresses consistently in the same way: a black suit and clerical shirt to lead worship.

C. Comparisons with Other Women

Another type of comment women pastors received about their clothing is comparisons with other pastors, particularly their predecessors. Lily, 54, is the pastor of a small, urban, United Methodist church. She said she receives a lot of comparisons regarding her looks with her predecessor. Similarly, Victoria, 26, the pastoral intern for an ELCA church, said she has received many comments comparing her with previous pastoral interns, especially women. All of the comments about her clothing and hair have made Victoria feel like she is under constant scrutiny, and that if she does not wear the right clothes, she will not be perceived as having pastoral authority. The comments comparing her with other pastoral interns have contributed to her feeling that “women ministers are under additional scrutiny regarding their choices about clothing, hair, accessories, and makeup.” Victoria said that, when she was in seminary, women were told to dress in a “gender-neutral” way, meaning that they should dress like men.

D. Men Do Not Receive Similar Comments

Several women pastors noted that their male colleagues do not receive the same kinds of comments that they do. Sadie, 44, the senior pastor of a large ELCA church, said, “I have always been aware of my body during public ministry. When I was younger and newly ordained, I was always careful of wearing clothes that didn’t emphasize my ‘feminine’ features.” Once when she worked with a team of seven men, they were surprised to hear that she received comments during communion and greeting at the door about her appearance. “I once had someone come up to me during communion and as I handed her the bread saying, ‘The body of Christ,’ she looked at me, pointed to my shoes, and said, ‘I like your shoes!’” She said that the male pastors had never had a comment like that before. Natalie, 37, the pastor of a rural United Methodist church, said that at one church, she preached every other week and an older male pastor preached on opposite weeks. “My clothing choices were commented on nearly every week. His were rarely noticed or commented on.”

Women ministers also noted that their male counterparts could wear much more casual clothing than they felt they were allowed. Eleanor, 57, is the pastor of a rural UMC church. She said, “While the male pastors have been able to ‘get away’ with wearing khakis and polo shirts, I am expected to dress ‘up’ a bit more.” She feels that expectations for female clergy in robing and appearance are different than for men. Likewise, Naomi, 29, the pastor of a large nondenominational church, said, “My brothers in ministry can get up in a hoodie and jeans, but as a woman, I am expected to be nothing less than business casual for Bible studies, and Sunday morning must be full business or formal church attire.” Overall, as Isabelle, an Episcopal rector in late middle age observed, “Congregants are much freer in commenting to me on my hair and

appearance than to my male counterparts.” Isabelle said she is just grateful not to be a young woman in ministry.

E. Internalizing the Messages

One thing that was apparent in reading the responses was how deeply female ministers have internalized others’ anxiety about their appearance. For example, Madeleine, 29, is a UCC seminarian with a very supportive home congregation who has not received comments on her clothing in ministry. Even so, she said she is very conscious of what she wears and how she appears when in the pulpit. She noted that, as a seminary student who is not yet ordained, she does not own a robe or an alb, and her clothing is visible when she is in the lectern or pulpit. She said, “Perhaps it is my own sensibilities, but I have taken care with how I dress in order to appear professional yet approachable when acting in ministerial roles.”

Women in casual settings opt for more conservative dress, and feel pulled to be both modest and stylish. Whereas men in ministry can wear a “uniform” to preach, women in ministry have to pay much more attention to their physical appearance. As Claire, 54, the senior pastor of an ELCA church, said, “I am extremely conscious of how much attention is paid to my physical appearance. When I dress to lead worship, I am careful to be completely covered, modest, but as stylish as I am able to be.” Faith, 48, the pastor of a suburban Presbyterian parish, said the main areas of stress relating to her gender are always around clothes. She said she feels like she is always “on show” and in uniform, in a suit or clerical gear. If she “dresses down,” it is for a reason.

F. Gender Presentation

Dressing more formally often means exaggerating gender presentation, that is, dressing more like a woman. Terry, 28, who identifies as ambigender (both male and female), struggled

daily with gender presentation while doing CPE. The dress code for CPE was “professional,” and Terry fell into a uniform of shirt, tie, and vest. Terry said, “I’ve never had such a consistent gender presentation.” The supervisor said other people did not like the way Terry dressed. Terry now tells trans friends to avoid CPE and said, “I haven’t done any real ministry since. I don’t know how to hide who I am enough to be allowed to serve.” Julia, 37, a Quaker hospital chaplain, faced similar problems in CPE. She said that her male peers did not comment on each other’s clothing, but “they helped themselves to commenting about how I should dress up more, wear makeup, etc., to ‘look professional.’” For both Terry and Julia, this focus on their clothing and gender presentation added stress to an already stressful environment.

G. Outside the Church

Women in ministry do not only have to worry about how they dress while working in the church, they also receive comments about how they are dressed outside of it. Ruby, 48, said that when she was working in parish ministry, she was approached by a church council member who was concerned because she had been seen wearing Bermuda shorts at the grocery store. The church council member was concerned that it “may not have been proper.” Similarly, Vivian, 62, an ELCA pastor, shared a story about a time when she mowed the parsonage lawn in shorts and a t-shirt. The president of the women’s group was dispatched to talk to her about her shorts. She promised she would only wear them in the yard and only when she was mowing.

“Apparently, as a slim young woman, I had attracted too much male attention.” And Iris, 58, an ordained elder in a United Methodist church, said, “I was constantly picked on by the same old lady for not having stylish shoes on Sunday morning. She saw me in shorts and a tee shirt with a ball hat on my day off as I was getting ready to go kayaking, and almost had a coronary.” These

women's stories demonstrate how many women in ministry feel like they are always on display, and that others feel free to comment on their clothing regardless of the setting.

H. Editorial Gifts

Ministers also found that sometimes their choices in clothing and appearance led to “editorial gifts,” or presents intended to change the ways they presented themselves. Kimberly, 33, a United Methodist pastor said that when she was asked why she didn't wear a white robe, she said she did not have one. Then, “it became a Christmas gift.” Elena, 54, also a United Methodist pastor, said that one day she came back from lunch to find a gift certificate for a haircut on her desk. “No name, just a very thinly veiled suggestion that I needed to get my hair cut. Since then, I have worn my hair up on Sunday mornings.” And Nicole, 49, an associate pastor of a suburban United Methodist church said that she once wore knee-length linen shorts on a Sunday in August. On Monday morning, she found a paper sack outside of her office, containing a knee-length, heavy, yellow skirt that was much bigger than the size she wore. There was no note, but Nicole learned a year later that one of the matriarchs of the church left it for her.

Some women simply received mail saying that their clothing was inappropriate. Brooke, 58, the transitional pastor of a PC(USA) church, said that in her first call as an associate pastor, she got anonymous mail suggesting that her skirts should be longer and she should not wear things that suggested she had a female body. She said, “I struggle with that to this day. I love skirts and heels; it makes me feel good, yet I think that some of the congregation is threatened by the idea of a good-looking female in the pulpit.” Josephine, 60, is the pastor of three United Methodist churches. The first Advent she was in a small, rural church, she received what looked

like a Christmas card. Inside, the writer said that their pastor always wore a suit. She said it made her sad, hurt, and angry.

I. Nail Polish

Although it does not fit in the category of clothing, the stories about nail polish illustrate the kinds of contradictory and arbitrary messages female ministers receive about their appearance. Carrie, 57, a retired UCC pastor who worked predominantly in the UMC said, “I love colored nail polish, but I was banned from wearing it on my hands on Sundays because it was ‘distracting to the congregation.’ I complied (my job was threatened if I didn’t!) but took to wearing very colorful toenail polish and open toed shoes. After all, my feet didn’t show from the pulpit!” Similarly, Charlotte, a 48-year-old Episcopal priest said that she once wore colored nail polish and was informed that it was distracting, so she only wore clear nail polish after that. But Eden, the senior pastor of a large ELCA church had a parishioner say that she would look better if she painted her nails, especially when serving communion.

J. Robes

So many women said that they love preaching in robes, because then the conversation is not about what they wore on a particular day. For example, Stephanie, 51, the pastor of a suburban United Methodist church, said, “I choose to wear a robe when possible to cover up things that have proved distracting.” She noted that otherwise, she can spend hours preparing for a sermon and the only feedback she will hear is conversations about sleeve length, color of clothes, whether she is wearing a skirt or pants, the length of her hem, or her choice of shoes. She said that these kinds of comments feed insecurity.

Lucy, 50, an ELCA associate pastor of a three-point parish said that she prefers to vest when leading worship in part because it puts her in the worship mindset, but also because it

means she does not have to decide what to wear. Her male colleague vests for Sunday services, but at other times, he wears a collar, black pants, and a black suit coat: the “standard” male pastor’s uniform. She commented, “It is much harder to ‘hide’ when not vesting.” Similarly, Miranda, 57, the interim pastor for a PC(USA) church said, “I intentionally wear a robe or alb for Sunday worship, as it cuts down the comments about what I am wearing.” She noted that for many years, she served with her husband as co-pastors, and he did not get the same kinds of comments.

Other women started out not wearing robes, but ultimately found them useful. Josie, 56, the pastor of two United Methodist churches, said that for her first appointment, she usually did not wear a robe because the churches were casual, but she wore one for special services, such as Christmas and Ash Wednesday. One of the men in the church said she should wear a robe all the time because it made her look like more of an authority figure. She decided to wear it for regular worship services, and it seemed to help some of her parishioners to take her more seriously as a pastor. Likewise, Brenda, 64, the pastor of a UCC church, said that when she first started out in ministry, she was not interested in wearing robes. After preaching two Sundays, however, and hearing more comments about her clothing than about the content of the sermon, she decided to robe to preach. She said that pattern has continued nearly every time she has chosen not to robe.

Jada, 45, the pastor of a small UCC church, said that, as a young minister, it was very important to her to robe to preach, even when it was very hot outside, because she felt that the robes made her fairly neutral in her appearance. She said she wanted to avoid people leaving the worship services and commenting on her rather than on the sermon or what they experienced in worship. Also Nina, 48, the senior pastor of a UMC church said that she believes in wearing a robe for almost every worship experience, both because it represents her role, but it also helps to

take her body out of focus when she is preaching and leading worship. She said, “I just don’t want people thinking about my body during worship.”

However, wearing a robe does not always mean that others will not comment on a woman minister’s body. Elena, 54, a United Methodist pastor, said that she has chosen to always robe because that allows her wardrobe to be a non-issue when she is preaching and leading liturgy or worship. But even with a robe on, she had two men within two weeks commenting on her shoes. She said, “Who’d have thought that my shoes would make a difference?! I sure am glad that I robe!”

Another reason that wearing robes is not a universal solution is that not all settings and denominations have ministers robe. Vanessa, 34, a Disciples of Christ pastor, said, “I have personally struggled with how my body is supposed to look. I’m in a setting now where no one wears robes, so I am constantly concerned about how I dress.” She feels that she has to be careful that her neckline is not too low, her outfit is neither too appealing nor too frumpy.

Even women in denominations that do not traditionally have ministers in robes have decided to wear them. Elsa, 53, Unitarian Universalist minister said that in the UU tradition, many ministers choose not to robe. She has decided to robe, however, in part to avoid conversations about what she was wearing. Similarly, Quakers traditionally do not wear robes, but Lila, 53, a Quaker pastor, said that she thinks a robe is the answer to the difficult challenge of how to dress.

Rosalie, 48, an ELCA pastor and nursing home chaplain summed up the position of many of the women’s stories when she said, “I’m really glad that our tradition calls for robes on Sunday mornings, because it takes ‘how to dress’ right off the table. When not in robes, though, there’s just no female equivalent to the polo-and-khakis that seem to be the ‘utilities’ version of

the uniform that men pastors wear.” Thus, even women who chose to wear robes while leading services still have the dilemma of how to dress on other professional occasions.

III. Women Ministers as Threatened

“When I was speaking, I told a story of being sexually assaulted on the street. At the Q&A time, an older white man stated in front of the entire conference that he would like to do the same thing to me, and then asked me to respond.”

In some ways it is easier to see the ways that women ministers are threatened than how they are threatening. When a female pastor is sexually harassed or assaulted in a church, that is a pretty clear example of how women ministers are threatened. Not all of the stories women shared were quite as explicit, however. Many talked about sexual comments, parishioners and colleagues who crossed boundaries, and bullying. I was surprised and appalled at the amount of sexual harassment and assault that took place in churches and especially during worship services. No one should have to deal with that in her workplace or her place of worship.

A. Sexual Comments

Women in ministry find they have to field comments that might be intended as a compliment but in fact make them feel uncomfortable or seem threatening. Examples that respondents shared included, “You have great legs!” “She’s hot,” and “With that body, I wouldn’t hide it under a robe.” These comments occurred in inappropriate places, such as the vicar who heard at a funeral, “We’ve had a lot of vicars, but not a hot vicar before.” One woman said that a parishioner referred to her as a “MILF—a minister I’d like to f---” when she was no more than three feet away. Another said that when she was reviewing a building project plan, a man said to her in front of the committee, “How deep is your back door?” She said it is the most offensive thing anyone has ever said to her.

Several women shared stories about men asking them during the course of their work whether they have husbands. Joanna, 30, the children, youth, and young adult minister for a Disciples of Christ church said that, after she got married, one man in particular would constantly ask if her husband was still in the picture. Haven, 59, the pastor of a small, rural UMC church said that once, after performing a funeral, a man approached her and asked if she had a husband. She said she did, and he responded, “Shame, I would have loved to take you to dinner.” Haven smiled politely and turned away, and he said, “Well, you didn’t say no, so does that mean I have a shot?” She answered that she and her husband would be happy to meet him for dinner. He said that was not what he had in mind and walked away. Similarly, Heidi, 28, who works in an urban Episcopal church, shared how a man in the neighborhood often said how beautiful she is and how angelic she looks. One morning before the service, he said, “I know you’re married, but, uh, is there any chance that someone . . . someone like me would . . .” She maintained eye contact, but refused to finish the sentence for him. He said, “Never mind.” Heidi reflected, “Some part of me wishes I could pass as male.”

Parishioners also made uncomfortable comments when ministers interacted with their spouses in church. For example, Veronica, 62, a retired PC(USA) pastor, would conclude the worship service by stepping away from the chancel and walking to the back of the sanctuary, stopping to kiss her husband who sits near the chancel on that aisle. A man who was new joked that he thought she was going to kiss all the men sitting on the aisle.

In addition to the comments within the church, ministers also faced harassment and comments from people outside the church. Daphne, 37, solo pastor in a small, urban, PC(USA) church, told a story of being harassed by men watching her from outside the church while she went in and out of the church building. The men, who live across the street from the church,

would sit on their porch, drink, and catcall her as she walked in and out of the building. She went over to introduce herself, and after some small talk, one man said that he had been watching her and liked how she loaded things. He asked how she could carry all those heavy things all the time. The other man yelled at him, “Stop hitting on the pastor!” They both burst into giggles and apologized for being drunk and inappropriate.

As noted in the previous sections, women in ministry receive different kinds of comments in response to leading worship than men. Lana, 25, a pastor of a small American Baptist church said that one Sunday, “One woman said that I looked beautiful up there leading worship. Then, she realized that she ought not ignore my husband and his worship leadership, so she turned to him and awkwardly said that he looked good up there too. It was clear that she did not know what to say.” Lana said, “It was an attempt to support us that seemed to leave even her feeling awkward. I do not believe she had a language to support us and respond to us as ministers.”

Ministers often find that they have little support when others make inappropriate comments. Ada, 48, a United Methodist working in a Presbyterian church, said, “As a seminarian, I was approached during the postlude by an older man who started by telling me how happy he was that I was there. He then remarked on how he and other men in the congregation envied my husband because of my body, and how I looked in my dress, etc.” She said she was totally unprepared for that kind of harassment and her jaw fell open. When she told the senior pastor, he brushed it off, saying that women always commented when he got a new haircut. She asked him, “When’s the last time one of them said your ass looked good in those pants?” When Ada reported the story to her pastoral care class, her professor asked what she was wearing and then said a sweater dress was not a good choice. She said, “I felt belittled, demeaned, betrayed, and ashamed of my own body.” The senior pastor and the seminary should have supported Ada

and taken her concerns seriously, but in both cases, those with authority minimized her concerns and, in the case of the professor, put the blame on Ada and her body.

B. Crossing Physical Boundaries

It is not just sexual comments, however. Many women shared stories of people crossing their physical boundaries in ways that made them feel demeaned and uncomfortable. Talia, 53, who has worked as a chaplain and the pastor of a PC(USA) church, said that once when she was performing a wedding, the father of the bride introduced himself. She reached out to shake his hand, but he pulled her in for a hug and said, “I always hug the ladies.” She felt demeaned, knowing that he never would have treated a male pastor that way. The hug felt creepy, but she did not feel free to speak frankly about the inappropriateness of his actions. Eve, 48, an associate pastor of a medium-sized ELCA church, said that one Sunday after worship, she was standing in the narthex waiting for worshippers to leave the sanctuary when an older male member of the choir rushed toward her. She thought he had something important to tell her, but instead when he reached her, he touched her arm and told her how much he liked her hair.

People touching women’s hair in particular is a big issue. Cynthia, 34, the pastor of a UMC church, commented that people seem very comfortable touching her, on the sides of her torso and her hair. She said, “I’m regularly forced to talk with people about why the body isn’t actually public territory.” Sheila, 40, a black Episcopal priest, said that she has dreadlocks and has had a problem with people touching her hair, especially white people. She reflected, “I’m not sure if people understand that touching another person’s hair IS touching another person’s body, and it is not okay to do so.” It makes her feel violated when people touch her this way and, “to some degree, inspected (like they used to do at slave auctions).” In situations like this,

African American women in ministry have the dual struggle of people feeling free to touch black women's hair⁸ and parishioners feeling entitlement to women ministers' bodies.

C. Pregnancy

The boundary crossing and touching without permission was especially a concern for women ministers who are pregnant. There were so many stories from women who had parishioners touch their pregnant stomachs and ask inappropriate questions, like whether they were dilated. For example, Carmen, 30, the pastor of a suburban UMC church, had a baby recently and said, "[I] can't tell you how many people from the church touched my stomach." Her pregnancy and how she was progressing and feeling were often the sole topic of conversations on Sunday after worship. Toward the end of the pregnancy, several people asked her if and how much she was dilated. Helen, 56, the pastor of a UCC church in a small town, said that being pregnant and preaching made her body more of an issue, and she felt like people had a sense of ownership over her body while she was pregnant. They felt freer about touching her and commenting on her appearance. The community seemed to think of her body as community property, "they were invested in me as a vessel for the anticipated children." People also felt free to give her advice about how she should take care of her body. Similarly, Mallory, 27, the pastor of a UMC church, said "During my pregnancy, I received a lot of unsolicited belly touches, as well as comments on my changing body." She said it was quite strange to see how people assumed her body was "public domain" when there was another person growing inside of it. She had parishioners tell her what she should and should not be eating, grab her belly with both hands, and ask about her cervix and whether she had started to dilate.

⁸ See Lisa Respers France, "'Can I touch it?' The fascination with natural, African-American hair," *CNN*, July 25, 2011, accessed March 25, 2016, <http://www.cnn.com/2011/LIVING/07/25/touching.natural.black.hair>.

Parishioners also made inappropriate sexual comments about women ministers' bodies during pregnancy. When Bethany, 36, the pastor of a large UMC church, announced that she was pregnant, someone said, "I knew it. I noticed how your rear end changed shape when you lifted up the offering plates during the offertory prayer." And one of the trustees told Marilyn, 37, the pastor of an urban UMC church, that she was the "sexiest" pregnant woman she had ever seen.

Women ministers who have had multiple pregnancies have seen these patterns recur. Holly, 34, the pastor of a suburban UMC church, has experienced six pregnancies in ministry: three miscarriages and three full-term deliveries. She said, "Each time a person from the church or the community would greet me, they also touched, caressed, or patted my obviously pregnant belly as well." They almost never asked for permission. She learned to stand in ways that made this more difficult, blocking it with furniture or hymnals. "I was told that my baby was their baby. Each part of the pregnancy (which was a high risk pregnancy) was fodder for discussion, speculation, and advice giving." She expressed her desire not to engage and drew the line when a parishioner asked her husband how many centimeters she was dilated.

D. Harassment and Assault

Many ministers talked about "handsy" male parishioners, who would take the opportunity while hugging to touch the sides of their breasts or squeeze up against them. One said that she has old men who try to kiss her every Sunday in the receiving line. She said, "They aim for lips and get cheek, as I physically hold them away from myself in a pseudo-hug." Bridget, 54, the pastor of a large ELCA church, said that she had to establish boundaries when sharing the peace because "some old codger would try to cop a feel. I would tell them it was inappropriate and please stop."

Ministers had varying responses to this inappropriate touching. Bridget said that one time in particular she “felt a hand on my butt.” In response, she “said rather loudly, ‘Jim, I know that is not your hand on my behind!’ He shrank away as folks laughed him to scorn.” Annika, 30, pastor of an urban ELCA church: During the sharing of the peace, an older man grazed her breasts and tried to kiss her. He also tried to kiss her on his way out. He did these things in front of others, and it left her “completely motionless, uncertain what to do.”

Other pastors shared stories about men touching them inappropriately in other parts of the church. Caitlin, the pastor of a small town UMC church, said, “A young man who came into my office for pastoral counseling made many comments about the size of my breasts. He then approached me and attempted to embrace me. He said he wanted to lay his head on my chest. I removed his hands from me and pushed him away.” Marissa, 41, the pastor of a United Church of Canada church, shared that once the male custodian of a rural charge she was serving grabbed her and forced her against the wall in the narthex. She shot him a concerned and disapproving look, but did not say anything because she was in shock. He put her down and walked away. Regina, 54, the pastor of a rural UMC church, was pinned in an office by a male church member who told her what he could do to make her life better. When, Gloria, 61, the solo pastor of two UMC congregations, was divorced, a male parishioner approached her, pushed her up against the wall of the church, and asked if she “missed it.” She said “No!” strongly, and asked him to leave. He did.

I was surprised by how often these incidents took place in public. For example, Lindsey, 44, solo pastor of a rural, UMC church, said a man in the congregation tried to stick a gift tag down her bra during a Christmas gift donation gathering. She grabbed his hand and the tags and said, “No, they don’t go there. Put them on the table.” The man’s wife and daughter both

laughed and said, “Well, you’re part of the family now.” She said she was not sure what was more disturbing, that he had tried to put his hand down her blouse or that the women in his family thought this was normal behavior.

Another pattern was how women ministers tended to minimize the assaults. One woman said that she had been “brushed up against in a suggestive manner, my breasts commented on, cornered, and threatened to ‘be taken right here on this desk’ by parishioners.” She followed up by saying that the latter happened “only once.” Similarly, another woman said, “Only one time did an older gentleman goose me. Very quickly my boundaries were made clear. That never happened again.” Marie, 28, the pastor of an urban PC(USA) church, said that there is a man in the congregation who never shakes a woman’s hand, but instead holds one hand while he moves his other hand up and down her arm. She said, “One Sunday, I had my hands full walking into worship . . . Since I didn’t have an arm to touch free, he reached and grabbed me right on the breast and rubbed for a moment. I was mortified. The other female pastor saw this and we had to take a minute to shake it off to be able to lead worship.” Rather than reporting this assault, the two women pastors merely took a minute to “shake it off” before leading worship.

Perhaps women ministers respond this way because it is so common. Jessie, 36, the pastor of a small town United Church of Canada church, said, “One thing that still happens with disturbing regularity is inappropriate touching. I have found that ass pinching is a thing, especially when I’m wearing a clergy shirt. It tends to be the much older men, and I take it as a way to ‘keep me in my place.’” She says that nursing homes are the worst, but funerals are a close second, as men from other traditions want to remind her that she is “just a girl.”

Willa, 30, the pastor of a small, rural ELCA church, also shared a story about a man in a nursing home who she visited monthly. The man asked her to climb in bed with him, to kiss him,

and to give him a “real” hug. He then started asking her about how she felt about older men. He said he wanted her to be his girlfriend. He started calling her obsessively, up to 6-8 times a day on her office phone and her cell phone. Because he is a stroke survivor, his family and the nursing home staff did not take his behavior seriously.

Frances, 56, Anglican priest of a small, two point parish, told the story of a parishioner, an older, married man, who “began spending a great deal of time in the office. He then began having excuses to drop by my home (the rectory). He started out by giving me hugs. They became very uncomfortable as he would allow his hand to stray over my breast. I told him it was inappropriate but it continued.” She said, “One day, he discussed his sexual frustration in detail and I asked him to leave, telling him again it was inappropriate.” She met with him with the wardens, clearly stated that his behavior was inappropriate, and said that the next step would be to go to the police. She said it was difficult because he is a parishioner and well loved by the community.

E. Threatening and Bullying

Other women ministers told stories about being threatened, both anonymously and by people in their congregations. Rosa, 37, the solo pastor of a UMC church, has been in her current appointment for about six months, and has received inappropriate notes left inside anonymous offering envelopes with \$5 cash. The notes say things like “I’m watching you” and “Love what is between your legs!” It was disturbing for her and the women who count offering and left her suspicious and cautious with the members of her church.

Linda, 65, a retired UMC pastor, said that one Sunday, when she was talking to a team of ushers made up of four men, they began to argue. She said they were so angry, they physically surrounded her, with one holding on to her upper arm. Fortunately, the chimes began to play to

signal the service beginning and she was able to break away. Several people saw this happen because it took place in the back of the sanctuary minutes before worship began. It was frightening for a number of onlookers.

People can be threatening without saying a word. Whitney, 24, a Quaker minister, said that there is a man in her meeting who has been staring at her chest for years. “He will often stare for a full seven seconds, one Mississippi, two Mississippi, three Mississippi, four Mississippi, five Mississippi, six Mississippi, seven Mississippi, before he says anything to me. Then he always says, ‘You are wearing such an interesting shirt,’ or ‘You are wearing such an interesting scarf.’” And Natasha, 43, the solo pastor of a small PC(USA) church, said, “One man in particular really disliked women preachers. And so, every Sunday, when he would leave he would approach me in the line to shake hands and when it was his turn, he would stand really close in my personal space and just look down at me—wouldn’t even speak.” She said that it made her scared, but she could not even name it as bullying for a long time. It can be hard for women in ministry to say why this kind of behavior is so threatening, but it wears them down over time.

F. Supervisors and Colleagues

Women ministers experience this kind of boundary crossing and worse from supervisors and colleagues, as well. Blair, 38, the solo pastor of a small PC(USA) church, said that once, right before entering a joint Advent service, the other minister (a man) reached over to straighten her robe. “I was horribly uncomfortable with him doing that.” She said he was just too comfortable invading her space. Irene, 41, the pastor of a United Church of Canada church, said that the chair of the board greeted her with a hug that picked her off her feet. He was at least

twice her age and nearly twice her size. The other people gathered for the meeting laughed, but Irene did not appreciate being handled like that.

Mae, 55, a former Disciples of Christ pastor and chief of chaplain at a VA hospital, said, “The day I moved into my first parsonage in my first pastorate, the director of the church board made a very direct pass at me. I was so frightened. My impulse was to pack up and leave immediately.” After a few months, Mae told another woman in the congregation. It turned out that this man had been harassing women for years, but each woman thought they were alone. They banded together to confront him, and he stopped.

Kenya, 44, the pastor of a Methodist church, said that before she went to seminary, she caught the attention of the bishop, who decided to invest in her ministry by sending her to seminary. She was promised promotions and favors in exchange for responding to their sexual advances. She refused, and when she graduated in the top 1% of her class, no one would give her an assignment. The bishop had warned her that “he had the power to either make me or break me.” She did not have an assignment for two years because she would not allow herself to be sexually exploited.

Unfortunately, sometimes when these women try to report their experiences, the response is not helpful. Eileen, 58, the lead pastor of a mid-sized UMC church, said, “I experienced sexual insult, harassment, abuse in the office of a seminary professor and soon learned that others had as well.” Later, when she reported to her bishop that a man was stalking her, the bishop wanted to know what she had done to provoke such behavior and told her to handle it. The bishop’s response repeated a pattern that is far too common: putting both the blame and the responsibility on women who experience harassment.

IV. Integration

“My body is again mine, given to me by the Lord. It should be treated with respect in all activities with my approval, until I am called home to be with the Lord.”

Given all the dangers surrounding women ministers’ bodies, both in being threatening and being threatened, it is amazing that women continue in ministry. Rather than allowing these threats to stop them, however, some women ministers are finding ways to integrate body and spirit in ministry. Women ministers shared stories of how they draw on female images of God for strength, that pregnancy in ministry can be an example of the incarnation, ways of integrating sexuality and ministry, how they feel the Holy Spirit moving through their bodies, and how they see their bodies as examples for others.

A. Female Images of God

Ministers shared lovely stories about how female images of God inspire and sustain them. Miriam, 46, the rector of an urban Episcopal parish, draws on images of God as a mother. She said, “One of my favorite experiences has been sharing my love for feminine imagery of God by telling a story when I was an exhausted young mother, and offer prayers to God as mother, because in that moment, I knew intimately and deeply the power of a mother’s love.” Cecelia, 53, who works as a Christian writer, wonders how the gospel story would be different if Jesus had been a woman. She thinks that maybe the Creator gave his one and only son because if he sent his daughters, they would have been given or sacrificed and then ignored by the power to write of the miracles they had seen.

Virginia, 46, the rector of an Anglican parish, shared a story about presiding over a funeral that brings to mind Bible passages that describe God as a mother hen, covering her brood

under her wings.⁹ When she offered communion, a man approached the communion rail with tears in his eyes, and as she walked toward him, he broke down crying. Virginia reached across the rail and held him as he sobbed. He took communion from her, received a blessing, and returned to his seat. That night, the man called her. He said that he had been a victim of sexual abuse at the hands of a Catholic priest when he served as an altar boy, and he had not been able to enter a church since. He told her that he had never seen a woman priest before, and he found himself overcome with a desire to receive God's blessing from her, for the first time ever. He said that when she put her arms around him, her arms felt like wings surrounding him.

B. Pregnancy and Incarnation

Despite all the stories about how pregnancy can be threatening for congregations and responses to pregnancy can make ministers feel threatened, women who were pregnant during their ministry also talked about ways that their pregnancies were a gift. Some shared that their pregnancies made them understand biblical stories in new ways. Miriam, 46, the rector of an urban Episcopal parish, said that she tells stories of knowing what it is like to be a barren woman, after two miscarriages. She also had the experience of being pregnant on Christmas Eve, waiting for the birth of a child. "I experience the biblical story in my body—in joy and grief and loss, in the potential for new life and in its losses." Similarly, Brenda, 59, a part-time pastor of a suburban UCC church, recounted how she was pregnant during Advent one year, and her daughter was born on December 21. She said, "It was very powerful for me."

Other ministers said that their pregnancies led to more frank discussions about sexuality in their congregations. Lilith, 52, the pastor of an urban Congregational church, began a position in 1986 when she was five months pregnant. The male senior minister received negative

⁹ Matthew 23:37; *see also* Psalm 91:4.

comments about her presiding at the communion table, with parishioners saying that her pregnancy was distracting from the purpose of communion. The parishioners were uncomfortable because “the pregnancy made it abundantly clear that I was a sexually active person.” The senior minister explained to the congregation that he and his wife had three children, and that one could look at him and know that he was a sexually active person as well. He said that “sexuality was a blessed part of our lives as Christians and my presence as a worship leader was a reminder of the blessings of children in the church.” He continued to have her alternate leadership with him every Sunday at the table.

Similarly, Elaine, 51, the solo pastor of a Lutheran church, became pregnant in seminary and was visibly pregnant during her internship. One Sunday, when she was visibly pregnant, two older women went to the senior pastor and said that she should not be allowed to preach any longer. When the senior pastor asked why, they pointed to her swollen belly. The senior pastor said, “Oh, she has had sex, and you think she should not take the pulpit?” He smiled, pointed out that he has four children, and said, “How do you know I have not had sex when I take the pulpit on Sunday morning?”

Myra, 60, an Episcopal counselor and spiritual director, had two children while she was a priest. She was pregnant with her son when serving in campus ministry in a predominantly Roman Catholic neighborhood, where people often thought she was a nun. Wearing a collar and being obviously pregnant offered all of them a chance for conversation. She recalled how the neighborhood came to her for ashes on Ash Wednesday when she was due a month later.

For some, their pregnancies brought them closer to their congregations. Claudia, 49, the pastor of a small United Methodist church, said that her favorite story is about a male church member who absolutely loved the fact that his pastor was pregnant. He “loved to touch my baby

tummy (with permission) and was so encouraged by the new life I was carrying into the church.”

This may seem strange after all of the stories about women feeling threatened when others touched their stomachs during pregnancy, but the distinction here is consent. Claudia gave him permission to experience this part of her pregnancy with her, and that encouraged both of them.

C. Sexuality and Ministry

In the section on clothing, there were many examples of women ministers who tried to hide their bodies and sexuality, but what if women in ministry instead could embrace their bodies and sexuality as part of their ministry? As Patricia, 47, the head of staff of a PC(USA) church, said, women “have an embodied spirituality. We can celebrate our bodies.” Rose, 47, the head pastor of a PC(USA) church said that she used to “hide” her body, figuring that ministers shouldn’t be sexy, but then she decided that by doing so, she was only perpetuating unhealthy dichotomies between “flesh” and “spirit.” She said, “Now, when people seem surprised that a minister would be attractive . . . I just remind them that ministers are no different than any other people or profession.”

In her book *An Altar in the World*, Episcopal priest Barbara Brown Taylor describes the physical attraction she feels for God at times when she is preaching or praying. She writes,

Sometimes when I was praying, my body could not tell the difference between that and making love. Every cell in my body rose to the occasion, so that I felt the prayer prick my breasts and warm my belly, lifting every hair on my body in full alert. Body and soul were not two but one. God and I were not two but one.”¹⁰

¹⁰ Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), 39.

Taylor talks about how the Christian tradition has lost confidence in the body, but God loves not just the spirit, but also the flesh.¹¹ How would ministry look if women could celebrate their sexuality as a path to unity with God and demonstrate that from the pulpit?

D. Spirit Moving Through Bodies

In the Quaker tradition, individuals feel led by the Holy Spirit to give vocal ministry, which is often accompanied by physical manifestations of that spirit, or “quaking.” Accordingly, it is unsurprising that Quaker ministers shared stories of feeling the Spirit moving through their bodies in ministry. Adele, 56, a Quaker minister who works in mindful movement, said that the first time she felt led to give vocal ministry in meeting, she felt literally lifted onto her feet, almost without her consent. She said an energy had been building in her—along with the content of the message—and her heart was racing and would not slow down. She felt like it would beat right out of her chest if she did not stand and speak. She was surprised to discover that she was quaking! She said, “It was both glorious and terrifying.” Over time, she began to realize that her physical experience is what Spirit moving through her feels like. Usually she will not share a message unless she feels that sense of sensual urgency. She reflected, “My ministry is body-centered, all about unity in body, mind, and spirit.”

Another Quaker minister, Wendy, 53, who works in racial justice, shared a story about a monthly meeting for business that occurred a few days after a state legislative session. The state legislature had voted to include a question on the ballot asking if marriage should be defined solely as between a man and a woman. Wendy felt led to speak in worship and shared that, as a woman married to another woman, she felt the impact of that decision as an action taken directly against her and the woman she loved. She asked her faith community to take a stand with her, to

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 40-41.

acknowledge that people in their meeting were hurting. She said, “I began weeping: the pain of what I was saying could not be contained by the words I was speaking.” Others could feel that pain too, and during the break, several gave her hugs. That was the beginning of her solidarity work that has extended to working with people of color, so that she can be there for others in the same way that allies were there for her.

E. Women Ministers’ Bodies as Examples

After reflecting on their own experiences, women ministers said that they want to help others. Elaine, 51, the solo pastor of a Lutheran church, said, “I have learned much and now mentor other young clergy women.” And Dana, a minister in the PC(USA), said that she aspires to “create a space in the church for people to be whole. For people to be whole in their sexuality. For people to be whole in their bodies. For people to bring their whole embodied, earthy, sexual selves through the doors of the sanctuary.”

Others shared stories about how their particular bodies have enabled them to do ministry that they might not otherwise have been able to do. Stella, 26, Quaker minister who has worked in a pediatric hospital setting, said, “As a woman (and possibly as a Black woman), I was seen as a maternal and safe figure for the children within the hospital.” She says she knows she may have played into the role of “mammy” for those experiencing great distress in the healthcare system, but she was able to use that stereotype to embody the love of Christ for those who needed it the most. She now works for a nonprofit and works with predominantly Black communities, and finds that she can help people who feel most comfortable with other people of color. Similarly, Ingrid, 47, a Pagan religious leader, found that illness gave her a way to connect with people in her faith community. She was diagnosed with terminal cancer just before graduating from seminary. She quit her day job and became a full-time religious leader. She

said, “The cancer in my body both draws people to me and sends them running. My dying body has proven to be my greatest tool for connection.”

Being a mother and a grandmother has been an important way for Mercy, 56, the pastor of a large ELCA church, to express herself. She finds that being a woman in ministry provides freedoms not available to men: she can cry, laugh, or safe-touch her parishioners without criticism or question. She said, “I am a hugger and find that people of all ages need to be touched lovingly. They need to know you are available to them emotionally.” She added, “I love being a woman in ministry!”

Just by being women in ministry, these pastors are providing examples for others. Lesley, 46, a UCC pastor working in sustainable justice, said that when she was a pastor of a local congregation, an older transgender woman who had recently come out, came up to her and said how grateful she was to have a woman in the role of pastor. The woman said it gave her a model for her life in a way that a male pastor did not. Similarly, Paula, 37, a UMC denominational administrator, said that she has received multiple pictures drawn by a young girl of her in clergy vestments, embellished by jewels and glitter. She said, “I love that these girls see a woman in the role, and I hope they feel empowered to be spiritual leaders themselves as a result.”

Conclusion

“Ironically, though women are to be neat, pure, and clean in appearance, it is female experience that most actively engages the earthiness and dirtiness of life. Female imagery for God frequently evokes the dirtiness and messiness of birthing, the manual labor of baking and weaving, and the kind of creativity that makes something out of ‘the good for nothing’ at hand rather than out of untouched nothingness. Female imagery for God champions the God who gets dirty, and it announces to us that we must get dirty too.”¹²

When I began this project, I was working with the assumption that women in ministry face particular challenges because they are women, especially related to their appearance and sexual vulnerability. The stories women ministers shared confirmed this assumption time and time again: women shared stories about comments on their appearances and clothing as well as threats against their bodies. In particular, women talked about how their sexuality made people uncomfortable.

In addition to all of these individual stories, women ministers in the Christian tradition are part of a larger story. Genesis 1:27 tells us that women are created in the image of God, that God created people in God’s image and created them male and female. The witness of scripture is also that God created humans as sexual beings, and that sexuality is powerful. By observing our world today, we can see that God is calling women to ministry in the church, and women are responding to that call.

The discomfort that some feel about women ministers’ bodies and their sexuality is an opportunity for the church. It is an opportunity to confront the double standards that women face and remove some of the barriers to their ministry. It is also an opportunity for people of all genders to engage in open conversations about the power of sexuality. Bodies and sexuality are gifts from God. Seeing bodies that are different from the male body that has become the norm

¹² Carol Lakey Hess, “Education as an Art of Getting Dirty with Dignity,” in *The Arts of Ministry: Feminist Womanist Approaches*, ed. Christie Cozad Nueger (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 73.

for pastors provides an opportunity for all to reflect on how these bodies and sexualities are a gift. My hope is that all who are called to ministry will be able to bring their whole selves to this work, integrating body and spirit. We need ministers who can provide examples of embodied ministry—this is one way of reflecting God’s incarnate body in the world.

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