The Stained Glass Ceiling: Career Attainment for Women Clergy

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Despite formal acceptance, women clergy have faced subordination in practice in many Protestant denominations. Previous theory has located this disparity in a distinction between the bureaucratic or "tightly coupled" elements of denominational organization and those that are cultural or "loosely coupled," predicting that, as the innovation of ordained women becomes routinized over time, gender disparities among the clergy will diminish.

To examine this thesis, priests in the Episcopal church in 1999 (n = 15,056) are examined for career gender inequality in status of position. Status is measured by independent rankings of the prestige of 15 position titles by experts and randomly selected clergy (n = 22) producing a highly reliable scale (inter-respondent alpha is .99). I find that: women clergy are over-represented in subordinate positions and those having lower status; this inequality is remarkably constant and undiminished over time and throughout the clergy career; and occurs only in congregational, not administrative, positions. All three findings are confirmed in a smaller sample of clergy in another female-ordaining denomination, the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America.

These findings confirm yet also suggest limitations to the predictions using organizational theory. I argue that, in addition to organizational dynamics, the analogy of family relationships may also be fruitful for understanding gender in modern religious denominations.

Calls for admitting women to the ranks of ordained ministry have long been a controversial feature of American church life, but it is only since the 1970s that women have entered ordained ministry in appreciable numbers. Both the numbers of denominations sanctioning women's ordination, and the numbers of women actually entering the ministry, have increased dramatically since 1970 (Chaves 1993). Among the professions, the clerical ministry was one of the first to encounter proposals to admit women and one of the last to actually do so; and the acceptance of women clergy is far from universal or uncontested even today. Nonetheless, for many denominations two decades have now passed since ordaining women in significant numbers, providing a chance to take stock, as the innovation of female clergy becomes regularized, and to take count, as the

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number of women priests becomes sufficient to measure impressions and ideals against empirical data. Accordingly, a growing number of research studies have begun to examine women’s ordination and ordained women to provide purchase on issues about church organization (Chaves 1996) and culture (Chaves 1997; Schmidt 1996), clergy roles (Wallace 1992), and women in the professions more generally (Lehman 1993; Nesbitt 1997).

The Episcopal church has featured prominently in such studies (Morgan 1985; Nesbitt 1993, 1997; Prelinger 1992a; Schmidt 1996), since in a number of ways it is paradigmatic of the larger ecology of church organizations regarding women clergy. The Episcopal church, like other Protestant mainline churches, began ordaining women in the mid-70s\(^1\) after a decade of struggle. The symbolic and organizational position of priests in the Episcopal church partakes of elements of both Protestantism and Catholicism. While ordaining women is permitted under church law and is widely accepted in fact, the church’s constitution does not require it, and formal opposition to it is tolerated. Finally, the polity of the Episcopal church contains dynamics that are at the same time both congregational and hierarchical.

Recent research has focused on the disparity between formal acceptance and the actual status of women priests in those denominations that have begun ordaining women. Formal and symbolic elements in denominations may support and advance equal status for women clergy, yet as Chaves observes “denominational policy often fails to correspond to the actual practice of women in ministry” (1997: 1). As frequently noted (Lehman 1993; Nesbitt 1993; Schmidt 1996), the more responsible, prestigious, and superordinate church positions in virtually every female-ordaining denomination fall disproportionately to men. Or as more than one woman priest has said, “Ordination is one thing, deployment is another” (quoted in Schmidt 1996: 26).

As the Protestant mainline enters, as it were, the second generation of women clergy, a close examination of the character and trends of gender disparity is both timely and pertinent. Is the lower job attainment of women a product of the newness of women’s entry into a formerly all-male domain, or does it reflect more persistent structural disparity regarding women? Is it diminishing, or continuing in full force? Is it uniform, or only located in certain sectors of church life or structure? These questions underlie a pointed and practical concern: Are those women being ordained priests today likely to be better off than the pioneer ordinands of 20 years ago? These concerns form the central questions of this study.

The answer to these questions is by no means clear. Many factors suggest that, although there is still a long way to go to achieve full equality between

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\(^1\) Although some well-publicized ordinations of women, later regularized, occurred in protest to canons prohibiting them as early as 1974, ordination of women in the Episcopal church did not begin officially, nor in significant numbers, until 1977.
men and women priests, things have improved since the 1970s. The difficult
days in which women clergy were a novelty met by closed doors in congregations
are on the wane, if not largely over. The proportion of women entering the
clergy each year is increasing steadily, with dramatic cumulative effects that lead
one researcher to talk of the “feminization of the clergy” (Nesbitt 1997). Each
year increasing numbers of women gain positions of prominence and authority,
and there are a growing number of highly visible, competent, and respected
women. Nearly all newly elected Episcopalian bishops are fully supportive of
women in the clergy; the number opposing are declining as they graduate into
retirement. Since 1989 women are even being elected bishop, the highest
ordained status in the church. Factors such as these lead many to observe, as did
one woman priest, “Now I am no longer an oddity as a woman rector. . . . There
is a movement forward. . . . It’s not as quick as I’d like. I suppose it never is, but
there is major change” (quoted in Schmidt 1996: 30).

More theoretical analyses, however, are more mixed in their assessment. For
both Chaves and Schmidt the disparity between the formal and actual status of
women clergy is not accidental, but is grounded in the “loose coupling” of
denominational rules and practice that is part of the nature of church organi-
zations. Rules and practice regarding women move in different directions
because, for Chaves, the former are more sensitive to external cultural pressures
favoring women’s equality but the latter are more sensitive to internal
organizational pressures opposing it. Lehman (1987) expresses a similar insight
when he calls these competing forces “global” and “local” factors in denomi-
nations. Schmidt sees the rule/practice disparity as reflecting a more universal
organizational distinction between rational-instrumental “bureaucratic”
elements (much as Weber saw organizations in toto) and less pliable “cultural”
factors.

At the same time these analyses also see things improving for women in
ministry. For Lehman (1981b) local churches avoid considering women as
pastors because they perceive it might threaten the organizational viability of
the church. But Chaves more recently points out that, while denominations vary
in their resistance to it, the societal pressure for women’s equality has achieved
near-universal cultural hegemony. This fact combined with the high level of
current mobilization regarding women’s ordination means that, after controlling
for resistance, denominations are twice as likely to begin ordaining women today
than in previous periods (Chaves 1997: 181). For Schmidt the cultural elements
in denominations (and for Lehman, the local ones) resist accepting women
precisely because they are more resistant to change than the bureaucracy. In all
accounts it is clear that the prevailing vector of change is in the direction of
increased legitimacy and acceptance for ordained women.

On the other hand, none of this research provides direct support, either
empirical or theoretical, for the proposition that the practical acceptance of
women clergy is increasing in female-ordaining denominations. In part this may
be due to a lack of reliable trend data, and in part because the issue of formal ordination itself has been more preoccupying. It is also true, however, that there is no clear theoretical base in this literature for such a prediction. As already noted, the causes of opposition to women’s ministry, once they are ordained, are seen to be rooted in organizational and cultural dynamics of the denomination that are, by definition, conflicted. Furthermore, if the disparity between rules and practice regarding ordained women is due at least in part to its symbolic benefit for the organization, as Chaves argues, it follows that female-ordaining denominations have a stake not only in being perceived by outsiders as ordaining women, but also in being perceived by insiders who are in favor of women priests as being sincere and effective in promoting the full equality of women in ministry. The same set of dynamics that promotes the rule/practice disparity in ordaining women in the first place, in other words, would also promote disparities in acceptance and deployment once they are ordained.

DATA AND METHODS

Data for this study were drawn from the Episcopal Clerical Directory for 1999. Produced by the church’s pension fund, this reference work reported a total of 17,117 ordained clergy in the Episcopal church, consisting of 14,077 men and 3,040 women. Not all of these are priests, however, since the church also ordains men and women as deacons, a lower order of non-professional clergy whose services are usually unpaid and part-time (for gender differences among deacons see Nesbitt 1996). A total of 15,056 of the clergy reported were priests, consisting of 12,967 men (86 percent) and 2,089 women (14 percent).

Since participation in the pension fund is mandated by canon law, this constitutes in effect a 100 percent sample of Episcopalian priests. While basic biographical information is reported for every entrant, individuals may also approve the inclusion of career information. Priests are surveyed annually to update and approve their records. Pertinent information provided by the Directory is: sex, clerical status (bishop, priest, or deacon), year of ordination, current position title, starting year of current position, and position title and starting year of every previous position held since ordination. At least minimal

2 In fact a presumably small proportion of clergy does not participate in the pension fund and are not reported in the Directory. Priests who are currently unemployed or in nonstipendiary positions are not necessarily reported but may choose to be included. It is such factors as these, plus the more numerically significant and exogenous restrictions on reporting certain fields in the data or including priests in the analysis, that justify calling the data derived from the Directory a “sample” and applying appropriate tests of significance. The increased probability of Type II errors in regard to such tests, however, should caution against placing too much weight on them. For this reason all the critical evidence of this paper is presented in charts for inspection in addition to reporting statistics. Treating such statistics as population parameters, and ignoring significance levels, will not materially affect any of the findings of this study.

3 These fields were decoded from the electronic edition of the Directory; previously such information had to be hand-coded from the paper edition. Crew (1998) presents interesting gender comparisons decoded from
career information (title of current position) was included for 12,774 priests, a response rate of 85 percent. In 1999 gender was reported for the first time, permitting ready analysis of sex distinctions in the clergy.\(^4\)

While 89 percent (11,268) of men priests had some career information included, only 72 percent (1,506) of the women did. Only a small part of this sex bias reflects a difference in the proportion choosing not to be listed or to report career information: 3 percent of the women and 2.3 percent of the men are reported as withholding information. Although an additional number may have withheld information in other ways that were not reported, it is more likely the case simply that fewer women had current positions to report. Since in either event the job status of unreported women is most probably lower than that of those whose career information is reported, the effect of this bias is to inflate slightly the reported job status of women, thus strengthening any findings of lower status for women in this study.

From the issues discussed above I derived three general hypotheses to test using the Directory data.

Hypothesis 1: Women have more subordinate or lower status positions than men do, and this inequality is persistent.

The first part of this hypothesis simply states the general finding of previous research; if this statement were found not to be true it would call much of that research into question. The second clause addresses the issue of transitional versus structural disparity. A finding that male/female inequality (if it exists) has diminished over time would lend support to the view that, after some initial adjustments, the church is improving in assimilating and becoming more accepting of women in ministry. A finding that it had increased over time would, of course, suggest the opposite.

A more interesting theoretical result, however, would be to find that there was no change in male/female inequality since the earliest days. This would suggest that the practical opposition to women clergy was a fairly persistent structural component of denominational life — a “stained glass ceiling” — in the manner described by Chaves and Schmidt. Since cultures change much more slowly than bureaucracies, and the relative “coupling” of the two may not change at all, the less change over time I find in any inequality in deployment between men and women clergy, the more support my findings will provide for any explanation that finds such inequality rooted in organizational culture(s). This is true regardless of the direction of the trend, even though change in different directions would obviously indicate markedly different outcomes for women priests.

\(^4\) Previous studies of sex differences using the Episcopal Clerical Directory imputed sex from an analysis of names and/or names of spouses.
The second clause of Hypothesis 1, then, is a "null hypothesis," stated negatively with the expectation that it will be rejected, and setting a stronger standard for supporting than rejecting structural organizational theories of the disparities in women's reception into the clergy. Finding no change would support such theories in a strong sense; correspondingly, finding change in inequality would signal lack of support for, but not positive reasons to reject, such theories.

Hypothesis 2: Male/female inequality is greater among the more "loosely coupled" positions, and these positions are in congregations.

Certain clerical deployments are more subject to hierarchical control than others are. If loose coupling causes or enables male/female clergy inequality, then we would expect such inequality to be greatest in the most loosely coupled positions.

For purposes of this hypothesis I consider the more loosely coupled positions to be ones that are centered in congregations. While there is a general sense in the literature that opposition to women in ministry is rooted in congregations and approval is rooted in larger structures ("the bureaucracy"), only Lehman (1981a, 1987) makes this explicit. Chaves, in fact, argues that centralized denominations are more resistant to women's ordination than those with a more congregational-centered polity; but the more fundamental external/internal logic of his thesis weighs in the direction of seeing denominational acceptance of ordained women as moving in general from the top down. For both Schmidt and Lehman, it is the untidy wealth of local practices and cultures that supports most concrete resistance to putting into practice what the larger denomination has already formally approved. Whether resistant or not, it seems worth exploring whether the loose coupling of cultures, or bureaucracy and culture, in denominations is not enacted in the loose coupling of congregations with more general denominational structures and identities.

As with the first hypothesis, if this hypothesis is found to be true, it provides strong support for the structural organizational account of male/female clergy inequality; its rejection leaves the question open. Rejection should be interpreted with particular caution since numerous other factors could cause relative changes in inequality. Very strong support for a structural understanding would be provided by a particular case in which this hypothesis is true, that is, when inequality in tightly coupled positions is zero. In such a case it could be strongly inferred that the differential coupling of the positions (or the relative strength of culture versus bureaucracy), understood in terms of their relatedness to congregations, explains the opposition (if found) to women priests.

Hypothesis 3: Male/female inequality is smallest at the beginning of the clergy career.

Status attainment studies have regularly found that small differences in initial status or prestige lead, not surprisingly, to larger differences later in life. If the male/female difference in clergy careers is the result of generalized or cultural
practices, such factors should have the least effect early in the career, when the differences between equivalently-credentialed persons are the smallest; and their effect throughout the career path should be cumulative. If, on the other hand, male/female inequality results from initial, transitional difficulties accepting women priests, the disparity between men and women clergy should be greater early on, and lessen as the career progresses.

In order to compare status differentials, it was necessary to derive a reliable measure of status. The Directory contains no direct indicators of position status or responsibility (such as, e.g., income or employees supervised), but it does report a fairly wide range of titles for clergy positions. These are (in descending order of frequency): Rector, Non-parochial Minister, Vicar, Assistant Pastor or Curate, Associate Pastor, Chaplain, Priest-in-charge, Canon, Interim, Bishop, Dean, Professor, Supply Priest, Archdeacon, and Monastic. Previous research has assigned status based on the typical job responsibilities associated with various titles (Nesbitt 1996). This procedure appears to work fairly well, but is impossible to replicate since it is based on expert knowledge of the researcher. In a careful experiment, Bose (1985: 89) found that such “objective scores are not as useful for status attainment research as [scores based on reputation]” because they force clustering of statuses and are less reliable than prestige type rankings. With regard to gender differences, objective scores ignore the effects of gender incumbency in positions and of the gender of the one(s) producing the scores, both of which Bose found significant (1985: 89–99). Moreover, since my hypotheses dealt with differences in status, my concern was not to estimate the absolute value, but rather it was the more limited goal of gaining a reliable relative measure, of position status. For these reasons I chose to measure status based on reputed prestige.

In order to derive such a measurement I administered a survey regarding perceived prestige of each position listed in the Directory. A panel of experts knowledgeable about clergy positions in the Episcopal church was selected, consisting of six clergy and four laypersons active in diocesan affairs and deployment. In addition, 40 other clergy were selected at random from the Directory. Each of these 50 persons was asked, via a message to their latest published electronic mail address, to rank the 15 position titles listed in the previous paragraph from highest to lowest in prestige. Ties in ranking were allowed. Eighteen of the messages (three to the panel, fifteen to the clergy sample) were returned as undeliverable. Of the thirty-three messages that were delivered, twenty-two replied with the information requested, a response rate of 67 percent.

Because of concerns about gender bias in the rankings, both the panel and the clergy sample were stratified by sex. There was no bias in the undeliverable messages, and slightly more women than men responded to the survey (12 women, 10 men); however, subsequent analysis found no discernable gender bias in prestige rankings.
Agreement among the rankings was extremely high. On the highest and lowest ranked positions (Bishop and Non-Parochial Minister, respectively) there was no variance among the 22 respondents. The F-statistic testing inter-item differences among the responses is .76, with a significance of .76; Cronbach's alpha for consistency among respondents is .99. These statistics indicate not only that there is less variation among responses than may be due to sampling variation in this admittedly small sample, but also that there is extremely little variation among responses whatsoever. In this manner, although the absolute value of any position was not directly assessed, the score of each reflects the relative assessment of its prestige with a highly acceptable degree of reliability. Each position was therefore assigned its average score, and rankings were then inverted to make the scores more interpretable. The resulting scale of position prestige ranged from a high of 15 to a low of 1, with scores as follows: Bishop, 15; Dean, 13.6; Archdeacon, 12.1; Rector, 11.9; Canon, 10.7; Professor, 8.6; Chaplain, 8; Vicar, 7.9; Associate Pastor, 6.9; Priest-in-charge, 6.7; Monastic, 6.7; Interim, 5; Assistant Pastor or Curate, 4.3; Supply Priest, 2.4; Non-parochial Minister, 1.

ANALYSIS

Are Women Clergy Gaining?

In 1999, the average position prestige for all women priests (7.6 on the above scale) was 88 percent of the average prestige of all men priests (8.7). Twenty-one years earlier the prestige of women clergy (6.0) was only 72 percent that of men (8.3). Clearly by these numbers women have lower prestige of position than men, but the situation seems to be improving. These numbers, however, are highly misleading, particularly with regard to the trend. Because such global comparisons are frequently used to measure male/female inequality in the clergy, even by those who advocate for greater parity (Crew 1999), it is worthwhile to consider why this is the case.

Virtually no women, but over half of currently active male priests, were ordained before 1977. This fact by itself means that, for statistical reasons alone, simple gender comparisons of the proportion of any single position held must necessarily show an increase for women and a decline for men. Simply consider that at the beginning of any trend, that is, in 1976, men hold 100 percent of all positions and women hold 0 percent. Thus women can do nothing but increase, purely as an artifact of the analysis. Moreover, overall comparisons are bound to be inaccurate to the extent that tenure and experience affect clergy deployment decisions, because women's aggregate attainment of these qualities has increased dramatically since 1977 while men's has stayed relatively constant. Even in 1999 the average tenure of women priests (10 years) is only about a third that of men priests (29 years); in 1977 men's average tenure was slightly greater than 29
years but women's was by definition less than 1 year. Obviously a comparison
that does not take tenure and the much greater average seniority of men priests
into account is going to find both lower and improving prestige for women
simply on this basis.

To control for these inaccuracies, I precluded from analysis men who had
been ordained before 1977.\textsuperscript{5} Then for each year since 1977 I compared the
average prestige for men and women in that year. The results are shown in
Figure 1. This figure clearly confirms previous research in showing that the first
part of hypothesis 1 ("women have lower status positions than men") is true.
The aggregate prestige of women is visibly lower than that of men in every year
except the earliest year, 1977.

![Figure 1]

Source: Episcopal Clerical Directory 1999

The second clause of hypothesis 1 ("this inequality is persistent") also finds
strong support in Figure 1, although the picture is more complicated. Clearly,
there exists a status difference in the latest year, which is at least as large as in
any previous year. Further, comparing the first years of the period with the last
years appears to indicate that male/female inequality has increased; however, the
trend is far from uniform. As the "Difference" line at the bottom of the chart
shows, inequality increased rapidly for the first 5 years following the initial

\textsuperscript{5} Prelinger (1992b: 291) reports that the Episcopal church's deployment office adopted a similar strategy in reporting gender comparisons.
ordination of women, then increased only slightly from 1982 to 1989, and has not increased at all since 1990.

This curvilinear pattern may still be due to average tenure differences. The fact that male/female prestige is most similar when tenure is the shortest and thus also most similar illustrates that tenure does have a strong effect on prestige, at least early in the career. Although the chart excludes the most extreme differences of tenure, it does not take into account different mean tenure among male and female clergy ordained since 1977. As it happens, in 1978 only 15 percent of ordinands were female; by 1984 that had doubled to over 30 percent. This rapid increase from small beginnings means that for the first 10 years or so after women's ordination, the average tenure of women priests was still much less than that of men priests ordained since 1977. By the mid-1980s these tenure differences had begun to diminish, and by 1990 they had stabilized. This pattern suggests two things. First, it suggests that a measure that takes the remaining tenure differences into account may find a reduced increase in inequality over the period. Second, by showing that there is very little difference in prestige overall at the beginning of the period, it suggests that career comparisons will also find more inequality at the beginning than at the end. Both of these suggestions anticipate Hypothesis 3 and will be taken up in turn when we examine that hypothesis.

Whether closer analysis will show that male/female inequality is increasing or stable, it is nonetheless apparent that it is not declining. When women priests are compared to men ordained during the same period, in distinct contrast to global comparisons, the inequality between them is not observed to improve over time. With regard to parity between men and women priests, if Figure 1 does not allow us to decide whether the situation is staying the same or getting worse, it does provide strong evidence for the conclusion that women clergy are not gaining.

The Effect of Congregations

In large part, to talk about clergy deployment in the Episcopal church is to talk about pastoring congregations. Over half (53 percent) of the priests in the church hold the position of Rector, the senior pastor of a self-supporting parish, or Vicar, pastor of a (usually smaller) church that receives financial aid from its diocese. Another 20 percent serve in subordinate positions in congregations with the title of Associate or Assistant Pastor. As independent, local centers of religious life and culture, congregations embody the "loosely coupled" parts of denominational organizations in which resistance to the ministry of women priests is thought to reside most strongly. Hypothesis 2 tests this thinking.

As before, global comparisons of all men and women clergy with regard to congregational involvement tend to be misleading. In 1998, for example, 32 percent of women priests, compared to 35 percent of men, were senior pastors of
congregations. On the other hand, whereas only 11 percent of men have a subordinate position in a congregation (assistant, curate, or associate), 32.5 percent of women do. Women, we might conclude, are only slightly less likely to head a congregation, but three times as likely to assist. A line tracking the percent of these positions held by gender would show a steady increase for women in all of them since they began to be ordained. This, however, would be mathematically true of any new group of clergy; it ignores the obvious fact that, prior to 1977, men held all of these positions. To be accurate, a comparison of the relative status of men and women must involve only contemporaries, that is, priests who were ordained at the same time, and must permit comparison of all parish-related statuses (not just rectors) at once.

Figure 2 does just that. It presents the “share” held by women of each of the four congregation-related positions in the Episcopal church since women began to be ordained in 1977. The “share” is the proportion of each status held by women compared with the proportion of all clergy ordained since 1977 who are women. If clergy are deployed entirely without sex bias, then this share will equal 100, which thus may be thought of as the “fair share” amount for each status. Amounts over 100 indicate that women are over-represented, and amounts under 100 that they are under-represented, in a particular status.

The position shares of women clergy shown in Figure 2 provide strong support for Hypothesis 2. Women are highly over-represented in the more subordinate parish positions and highly under-represented in the more responsible ones. In the most senior parish position, Rector, women’s share has not risen much above half of their fair share. Women priests have their full share as Vicars of smaller, poorer churches; and they are over-represented by about half in the subordinate positions of Assistant and Associate.

From this pattern it appears that parishes are not resistant to the ministry of women priests on the whole, but only women priests in positions of leadership, specifically as rectors. Congregations are quite welcoming of women priests in subordinate positions. Thus their objection, it appears, is not on the whole ideological, but consists of the exactly the kind of cultural resistance that the structural theorists have predicted. The position of Rector is the most authoritative, prestigious, and common of parish positions in the church. Resistance to accepting women as rectors, as documented in Figure 2, would account for a significant part of the overall male/female inequality among clergy in the Episcopal church.

This pattern of resisting women clergy in leadership roles but accepting them in subordinate ones is confirmed in data from another Protestant denomination. A 1990 survey of ordinands of a mainline group, the Presbyterian Church in the USA (PCUSA), contains information about career attainment that permits legitimate comparison with the Episcopal data. In the PCUSA data the definition of “Sole Pastor” is comparable to “Rector” in the Episcopal church; the PCUSA survey also lists positions of “Assistant Pastor” and
FIGURE 2

Women's Share of Parish-Related Statuses
(Proportion of each status expressed as a percentage of the proportion of clergy who are women, 100 = "Fair Share")

"Associate Pastor" which are virtually identical to the same-named positions in the Episcopal church. Figure 3 shows women's share of these positions in the PCUSA in a manner comparable to Figure 2. Strikingly, the pattern of under-representation in senior positions and over-representation in subordinate ones is virtually identical to that observed in the Episcopal church over the same period. Women's share of "Sole Pastor" positions in the PCUSA varies little from 50 percent over the period, matching precisely the similar inequality in the Episcopalian data. Likewise, women ministers' share of assistant and associate positions in the PCUSA is almost the same as among the Episcopalians.6

6 Data for PCUSA clergy were made available by the American Religion Data Archive (http://www.thearda.com) and were originally collected by Edgar W. Mills, University of Connecticut. The survey, originally conducted for a study of seminary alumni funded by the Lilly Endowment, contains demographic variables on 1505 PCUSA clergy ordained from 1977 to 1989. In these data assistants and associates were combined into one category. The survey also had an additional category "Senior pastor with other staff clergy." By 1989 4.2 percent of active male clergy (25 ministers) ordained since 1977 had attained this status; but no female clergy.
In light of these strong findings, it may be worth while to extend the question of persistence stated in Hypothesis 1 to the issue of attaining senior pastoral positions. Is resistance to women as rectors persistent, or is it changing? Figure 4 displays the percent of priests, male and female, who attained the position of rector within seven years after ordination for each annual group of ordinands since 1977. The figure shows three-year moving averages in order to reduce annual fluctuation. The gap between the two lines of this figure corresponds to the women's share of rectorships reported in Figure 2; the fact that for all years in Figure 4 about half as many women as men become rectors, as a proportion, corresponds to the general 50 percent figure for women's rectorship share in Figure 2.

This stability of this proportion over the period shown in Figure 4 is striking. It is apparent that, for reasons beyond the scope of this study, the proportion of priests who become rectors in the early part of their careers has been declining over the period shown. Whereas over 40 percent of men and nearly 20 percent of women ordained in the early 1980s became rectors within seven years, for those ordained a decade later these percentages were cut in half. It is significant
that, despite this decline, and despite the fact that different proportions of men and women were ordained over the period, the relative proportions of men and women becoming rectors did not change very much. Even when the availability of rectorships to be filled, or of men and women to fill them, is in flux, the inequality between men and women in the attainment of rectorships has stayed relatively constant. This suggests again that structural, cultural factors underlie the male/female disparity in attaining this important status.

FIGURE 4
Percent of Episcopalian Who Become Rectors Within 7 Years by Year of Ordination

The thrust of these findings, that female clergy are consistently overrepresented in subordinate, lower-status positions with regard to congregations, confirms the findings of several recent studies of a wide range of religious groups (Nesbitt 1993, 1997; Marder 1996; Zikmund, Lummis and Chang 1997). However, Hypothesis 2 claims more than this: not only that there is inequality in "loosely coupled" congregational positions, but also that this inequality is greater than in more tightly coupled positions. To test this claim, gender differences in status in congregational positions were compared with those in positions more subject to hierarchical control. The results are shown in Figures 5 and 6.

To distinguish positions, two tests were applied: 1) The decision to hire typically requires selection or ratification of the candidate by a congregational committee, council, or vestry; 2) the position establishes a long-term permanent
(not temporary) relationship between a clergyperson and a congregation. The first test establishes that the employment decision for the position is based in the congregation and not larger church hierarchy or structures. Such decisions, if the theory holds, are likely to be more responsive to cultural or internal pressures than bureaucratic or denominationally exterior ones. The second test excludes arrangements that are defined as being interim or provisional, in which the priest and the parish themselves may be only “loosely coupled.” Positions that met both tests were considered parish positions; positions that met neither test were considered nonparish positions; positions that met one test but failed the other were dropped from this analysis as borderline or ambiguous. By this means, the positions of Rector, Vicar, Assistant Pastor, Curate, and Associate Pastor were classified as parish positions for the Episcopal church. Nonparish positions are Non-parochial Minister, Chaplain, Canon, and Professor. For the PCUSA data, parish positions are Pastor, Sole Pastor, Assistant Minister, and Associate Minister; nonparish positions are Chaplain, Campus Ministry, Judiciary or Agency Executive or Staff, and College or Seminary Teacher.

FIGURE 5

Prestige by Parish/Non-parish Position by Sex — Episcopal Church 1998

Note: Circled values are not significantly different at .05.
FIGURE 6
Prestige by Parish/Non-parish Position by Sex — PCUSA 1989

Note: Circled values are not significantly different at .05.

Figure 5 displays values from the Episcopal Clerical Directory for 1998 (the most recent year); Figure 6 presents values for 1989 (the most recent year) from the smaller PCUSA sample. In both the results are strikingly similar. In parish positions the average status of women priests is lower than men, but in non-parish positions there is no measurable difference between them. These findings clearly indicate that resistance to equality for women priests is related to the dynamics and decisions of parishes. When deployment decisions are made by bishops, other clergy, judicatories, or other entities not based in parishes, there is no discrimination in status between men and women for clergy assignments.

7 The t-statistic testing the equality of prestige for the nonparish positions was not significant at the .05 critical level for both the Episcopalian and the PCUSA data. For the Episcopalian data, t = .23, with p = .82; for the PCUSA survey, t = .16, with p = .87. These are one-tailed tests since women were predicted to have lower status. Recall, however, that there is an increased risk of Type II error in these data.
These results provide the strongest possible support for the structural explanations of opposition to women priests. In those positions where deployment decisions are most tightly coupled to denominational bureaucracy and/or the larger institutional culture there is no disparity at all between formal and actual acceptance of women in ministry.

Unequal Careers

By this point the evidence is quite strong that male/female inequality among the clergy is a result of embedded cultural values which have not shown much change over time. Regarding all of the effects examined in Figures 1 through 4 the difference between men and women priests, after an initial period of volatility, was found to be relatively stable. Neither women's share of parish-related statuses (shown in Figure 2), nor (consequently) the overall average prestige of men and women (Figure 1) are observed to have changed much since 1991. The attainment of rector or sole pastor positions relative to gender does not appear to have changed much since the mid-1980s for either the Episcopal church or the PCUSA.

Hypothesis 3 predicts that the status of women clergy relative to men will decline throughout their career. If this is true, it may indicate either structural or cultural barriers that inhibit women from achieving status above a certain level (a "glass ceiling"). Changes over time in such career disparity, however, can suggest much more than this. If the general level of gender inequality changes, we would expect this to be reflected in careers initiated at different times, but in different ways depending on the type of change. If the change were of the nature we have called bureaucratic or rule-oriented it would tend, with some exceptions, to have a direct effect on clergy at whatever point in their career they happened to be. If the change were based more in practices or culture it would tend to have a cumulative effect throughout the clergy career. Formal changes, I am suggesting, would tend to raise or lower beginning and ending career statuses without widening the difference between them; cultural changes would tend to widen the career "gap" without (uniformly) raising or lowering the statuses involved.

To test Hypothesis 3, I compared the prestige of women priests with that of men, both at the beginning of their career and again during the most recent year. These two comparisons were then compared with each other. Sets of comparisons were grouped by year of ordination; all priests ordained in the same year were compared. The results are presented in Figure 7. To simplify comparison this figure presents female status as a proportion of the status of comparable males. Although there is a lot of volatility from year to year, in every year except one (1978) the initial prestige of women priests compares more favorably with men than their ending prestige. These findings do not hold in years past 1991; in these years final prestige gradually rises as the careers
measured become shorter; thus careers shorter than nine years long were dropped.

**FIGURE 7**

Initial and Current Prestige of Female Priests  
(expressed as a percent of male prestige)  
Episcopal Church 1977–1998

![Graph showing initial and current prestige of female priests over the years 1977 to 1990.](image)

Note: Neither linear slope is different from zero, significance of $t > .75$.

Over all years, the initial prestige of women priests is 96 percent that of men; current prestige is only 83 percent. Significantly, there is no discernable trend in either initial or final relative prestige. The straight lines in Figure 7 show the fit of linear regressions of initial and current prestige on year of ordination. In neither case is the slope of the line significantly different from zero; there is no tendency for either the initial or current prestige of women to change relative to men. Those priests ordained in the late 70s who are 20 years into their careers show the same prestige differential as priests who were ordained a decade later.

In line with the results above, these findings indicate strongly that the reduced actual status of women priests is due to non-formal cultural factors, and that these factors are not changing. The formal equivalence of men and women clergy is accepted (almost) in their first post-ordination placement. As careers
mature and positions of greater responsibility and status are assumed, women are not able to advance in prestige as much as men. Past nine years into the career, this prestige gap achieves a fixed level which, although there is a lot of annual and individual variation, does not appear to change on average with subsequent tenure or experience.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Contrary to my initial expectations, this study found resistance to the ministry of women to be undiminished over the past 20 years both in the aggregate and in its effect on individual careers. Also contrary to expectations, this unchanging resistance was found to be located entirely in congregations, and not at all in decisions of the church hierarchy or other clergy. On both counts it appears that male/female inequality among the clergy is not due to formal institutional discrimination but is a result of embedded cultural values, values that are particularly resident in congregations and that show no indication of changing.

That the disparities regarding women clergy are “cultural” in a direct sense is evidenced by the obvious fact that such disparities are by no means confined to religious organizations. The position of women clergy mirrors the well-known pattern of continuing female subordination despite legal or formal equality that exists in other areas of American life. Despite fair-wage legislation, for example, women in the workplace still earn less than men do, an average proportion variously estimated from 71 to 91 percent. Gaining legal standing in the courts has not, for the most part, equalized sex roles and responsibilities in marriage and related relationships. Although female suffrage was gained nearly eight decades ago, to this day the higher the political office, the less women are represented in filling it. Disparities between formal acceptance and actual discrimination are well documented throughout the occupational structure and up to the present time (Brumberg and Tomes 1982; Reskin 1984; Scott 1994).

This resemblance to larger cultural inconsistencies regarding the status of women is buttressed by the striking stability found in the denominational incongruities regarding women clergy. In no analysis of this paper was there found any evidence of change regarding the status or prestige of women priests. The view that women clergy, after initial resistance, are now increasingly being assimilated into denominational life finds no support in these data.

These points, moreover, are not confined to the Episcopal church, but are equally true of at least one other Protestant denomination. In the PCUSA women's share of pastorates (about 50 percent of fair share, with no trend of change) is identical to that of the Episcopal church, as is the fact that there is no gender inequality in non-congregational positions. Yet the PCUSA began ordaining women in 1964, and has a distinctly different history, bureaucratic
structure, and theology of ordained ministry than the Episcopal church. The remarkable similarity, despite these differences, in the disparity between men and women clergy in these two denominations strongly supports the notion that such disparity is not based in the formal organizational characteristics or manifest norms of these institutions.

Whether or not this disparity is best understood as "cultural" or "internal," however, is another question. In the first place, the empirical immutability of women's inequality found in this study is so strong as to call into question the pervasive working assumption that gender inequality is not due to innate gender differences in behavior, choices, or goals in status hierarchies. If the acceptance/rejection disparity regarding women is rooted in organizational inconsistencies, then they must be inconsistencies that are in absolute equilibrium; this, however, is unlikely. I do not have the resources of data or design in the present study to resolve this question, but I note it as an unproven assumption for the research literature on women clergy, and perhaps for gender occupational studies in general.

Clearly, the collective agreements that comprise the larger institutional will of religious denominations are only imperfectly and partially enacted in the local, concrete life of their constituent congregations. Organizational theories of denominations must be qualified in order to account for this fact, as Lehman (1981b: 104) has noted: "In most religious organizations in the United States, effective and consistent hierarchical power to effect member compliance with policies formulated by denominational leaders is probably a myth." This disconnect is well termed "loose coupling" in an organizational sense. But the idea of coupling, in the sense of the transmission of authority or the articulation of norms, only expresses a small part of the richness and complexity of the relationship of religious congregations with denominations.

To the notions of organization and culture it might be helpful to add the analogy of "family" as a way of thinking about congregational/denominational dynamics. Congregations relate to denominations not just as branches of a common organization, or centers of a common culture, but more fundamentally as members of a common family. As in family, their relationship forms a central part of their identity. The binds that tie them are not in the first place those of authority, although authority is not absent. As in family, there is a good deal of socialization into a common culture and language, but these are not the basis of

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8 These differences, moreover, may interact with the decision to ordain women. Prelinger (1996b: 296) notes that Hewitt and Hiatt (1973: 27) argue that Presbyterian churches, "where the pulpit rather than the sacraments is central to the role of the clergy, found it easier 'to admit women to full liturgical preparation' sooner."

9 Some writers, reviewed by Prelinger (1992b: 294-296), locate opposition to women clergy in "primitive sentiments unconsciously motivated," thus presumably innate, associating sin with women's sexuality. For an argument attributing gender status differences to innate biological factors, see Goldberg 1993.
the relationship. And as in family, the formal, even legal, commitments they make are articulated in a complex, multifarious network of relationships that is often as sensitive to personal differences as it is to abstract ideals.

The internal congregational dynamics of opposition to women pastors are decidedly more familiar than organizational. Lehman (1981b: 116) has argued that women pastors are opposed because “clergywomen are usually perceived as a threat to organizational maintenance” and therefore “church members and officials will tend to act more to protect organizational viability than to comply with denominational policy (emphasis in original).” It is clear, however, that this “perceived threat” is not due to the clergywoman, but to the congregational conflict that considering and hiring her may bring about. “The mere possibility of a threat by a few members to withdraw participation and financial support from the church in response to calling a woman as pastor is sufficient to make most members seek ways to avoid the confrontation” (1981: 116). Lehman is clearly not claiming that there is a consensus that the woman pastor, qua woman pastor, will degrade the congregation’s organizational viability; the problem is that the conflict will hurt the congregation. However, the threat is not rationally conceived; it is doubtful that the organization’s viability is seriously in question in the scenario he describes. The real problem, I suggest, is not the conflict’s possible result on the congregation-as-organization but its possible result on the congregation-as-family. An organization — especially a voluntary association — can, indeed must, risk the loss of resources in the pursuit of a goal, particularly when the goal embodies its ideals, with the expectation of a subsequent greater gain in resources. Not to do so would be irrational — for an organization. But a family avoids the prospect of the loss or disaffection of any member with little regard to the net productivity of that decision. Thus to a much greater extent than organizations, families accommodate the diverse, conflictual, and irrational propensities of their members. In these respects, I suggest, congregations are much more like families than organizations.10

Moreover, the family-like nature of the congregation’s relations to other entities also helps to account for its lack of congruence with denominational policy. For as in families, congregations are engaged in many crosscutting relationships simultaneously. Congregations are not only embedded in denominations; they are also embedded in communities, counties, states, local ecumenical associations, social networks, public opinion, and building and tax codes. The conflicted nature of institutional maintenance for Protestantism in the ideal is manifested concretely in the porous boundaries between a congregation and any of these environments.

Because of this it is not possible clearly to parse the acceptance or rejection of women clergy by external and internal factors. Both the acceptance and

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10 Friedman (1985) presents a comprehensive model and argument for understanding congregations as family-type emotional systems.
rejection of women are responsive to both external and internal forces, but on different levels, reflecting — familiarly — the disparity that often occurs between national and local initiatives. Just as national decisions to ordain women have not for the most part been responses either to a concerted desire on the part of parishes to have women priests, or to an expressed dissatisfaction with men priests, so local decisions not to accept women pastors have not for the most part constituted an ideological rejection of the validity or competence of ordained women. Rather, whatever else it was, in virtually all cases the ordination of women was a response to a desire pressed by potential women ordinands themselves, defining themselves as a group in the church with definite interests. Similarly, the relative rejection of women clergy's local leadership, whatever else it is, is in virtually all cases a response to the concrete desires of congregants, desires which are in no way unique to religious congregations. Thus female priests' acceptance is an accommodation to an actual national interest group, as their rejection is an accommodation to actual local interest groups of resistance. The striking stability of this mutual accommodation (or, more negatively, balance of power) found in the present study is witness to the interlocking forces that hold both the acceptance and rejection of women clergy in sociological suspension.

Understanding denominations and congregations on analogy with families, finally, helps to account for the conflicted forces regarding women clergy that have been empirically observed in this study. The choice of a society of congregations to affirm the ideal of women’s ordination is related to the reticence of any particular congregation to have a woman as pastor analogously to the application of any social ideal to any particular family. For example, tolerance of homosexuality in the abstract is generally not associated with hopes that one's own children will be homosexual. Persons who strongly reject racial bigotry are nonetheless not likely to marry someone of another race, and reticent to advise their children to do so. Similar concerns might apply regarding someone who is disabled, chronically ill, or even of another religion. In all these cases, the calculus of family concerns supports a conclusion that is not a simple, direct application of the larger social principle involved. This need not imply that the family is "loosely coupled" to society, or hypocritical regarding the principle in question. After all, in many cases the calculus of concerns supports a conclusion that does not reject the principle. In all cases, this analogy suggests, the decision to accept a woman pastor is subject to many factors, not just one. Elements of rational choice regarding congregational vitality and concerns for boundary maintenance and identity must be processed in the context of intense interpersonal concerns regarding power, inclusion, and affection — to name just a few of the dynamics involved.

It may well be that congregations who make decisions to oppose woman pastors do so not because they are at variance with denominational ideals but because they are all the more tightly coupled to them. The view that anything
short of 100 percent compliance in practice with one's religious principles bespeaks a rejection of those principles is considered, by every religious group that ordains women, an intolerant moralism that fails to recognize the many ways in which particular situations shape the application of moral principles. The ordination of women may be less than, but is not more than, a moral principle for any denomination. For congregations, therefore, to variously instantiate that principle in their own local situations, far from indicating disparity, closely reflects the formal teachings and ethos of the denominations involved.

This study suggests a number of areas for further research. Previous research and reflection on the role of women clergy in denominations has tended to emphasize the innovative nature of women's entry into the clergy and the similarity between religious denominations and other institutions in American life. A helpful balance could be provided by future research that explores both the continuities of women's ordination with the entry of women into other areas of work and culture, and the organizational and institutional uniqueness of religious groups. In particular, research that compares congregations to families is likely to bear sociological fruit. As noted above, research into the role of different sets of personal choices and/or innate factors that influence gender differences in career attainment could confirm or falsify important assumptions that are made in all gender occupational research. Finally, examinations of non-female-ordinating denominations or of religious groups not composed of congregations could serve to verify or falsify the specific findings of this study.

REFERENCES

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