

## **Interview Themes & Responses**

### **Credentialed Women of Franconia Mennonite Conference**

**November 17, 2016**

**Anne Kaufman Weaver, MSW, M.Div. & Lara M. Weaver**

#### **Overview**

Steve Kriss, Conference Leader, invited us to conduct interviews with eleven women who are credentialed pastors that serve in congregational contexts in Franconia Mennonite Conference (FMC). During the summer of 2016, nine interviews were conducted in person and two over the telephone. Each interview lasted approximately one and one half hours. The pastors were asked the same demographic information as well as the identical interview questions. In advance of each interview, the women were told that the content would be shared with the Credentialing Committee of FMC but her individual or congregational name would not be revealed. While someone reading this report might be able to assume knowledge of a participating pastor, we ask that the reader focus on the content of what the pastor has shared.

#### **Demographics**

Ten pastors are married and one is single. One pastor is Latina, nine are Caucasian, and one preferred not to designate a racial identity. Four women have pastored between 1-10 years, four have served between 11-20 years, and three have ministered between 21-30 years. The ages of women varied: 20-30 (one), 31-40 (zero), 41-50 (four), 51-60 (three), and 61-70 (three). Four women are paid to work between 1-20 hours per week and seven are paid to work between 21-40 hours. Three women are solo pastors and seven women serve on pastoral teams. The majority of the women (8) report that their churches are in small towns/suburban areas while one is in a rural context, one is in a small city, and one in a large city. Educational levels also have a range: high school (1), college (2), masters (7), and doctorate (1).

#### **Interview Questions**

1. In what ways did your calling to ministry occur?
2. Describe your experience of the credentialing process.
3. What do you do to take care of yourself (body, mind, spirit, relationships)?

4. What resources do you draw on to enrich your ministry (people/professionals as well as books/ blogs etc.)?
5. What are the greatest obstacles, threats, and challenges to your ministry?
6. What do you wish the seminary or conference leaders knew about what it's like to be a woman in ministry?

## **1. In what ways did your calling to ministry occur?**

There were a number of ways that the women sensed the call to ministry:

- parental recognition, modeling or affirmation
- lay leadership opportunities in congregational settings to test gifts
- pastors, elders, conference leaders noticed and affirmed pastoral gifts
- mentors such as teachers, professors, chaplains, counselors, spiritual directors who perceived spiritual gifts suited for pastoral ministry
- spouses who confirmed the direction toward ministry or who were willing to be open to the woman's journey toward ministry
- co-workers who observed that the woman's gifts could be more fully used in a congregational setting as opposed to the current place of employment
- service workers/missionaries who helped to develop the call to ministry
- Seminary classes/retreats/conferences/writings that exposed women to female clergy

The pastoral calling sometimes correlated to specific people, places or purposes:

- Bi-vocational (meaning the blend of two careers or the blend of pastoring and parenting)
- Youth
- Outreach/Evangelism/Missional
- Social Justice
- Urban/multicultural setting
- People on the margins (immigrants, LGBTQ persons, low income)
- Creative writing or worship expression
- Shared power and authority/collaboration/team effort
- Counseling/Spiritual Direction/Pastoral Care/Teaching

## **2. Describe your experience of the credentialing process.**

Internal dialogue, congregational process, and conference interactions clarify aspects of the credentialing experience. Some women expressed the importance

of internally processing what it means to embark on the credentialing process. Some of the quandaries included: holding a variant perspective of an article in the *Confession of Faith from a Mennonite Perspective*, spouses or extended family's readiness for her credentialing, or ambivalence over the lifetime commitment to being a pastor.

The women expressed a wider range of experiences with their congregations around the credentialing process. One woman had been told during the interview process that she would be credentialed but the lead pastor and elders never initiated the process. A few women shared stories about congregations not being ready to credential women. The lead pastor of the churches took time to educate the concerned individuals with a Biblical perspective that supports women in ministry. Some congregations agreed to credential the women but they limited her preaching. Another reported that the process took longer than expected to deal with the anxiety in the congregation around credentialing a woman. Others felt supported by their pastors, elders, and conference leaders and reported there were no delays or obstacles. There may be a correlation to congregations who had previously worked through the credentialing of women. The sample is too small to say this with confidence.

Numerous women expressed appreciation for FMC staff that advocate for credentialing and work alongside congregations to ensure that the process unfolds in a timely manner. Some women felt "coached" by FMC staff to know how to handle completing the Minister Leadership Inquiry (MLI) as well as the Credential Committee interviews. Several women report that their credentialing process was slowed because they had to take the required Gateway Courses since they did not attend a Mennonite Seminary. Several women were credentialed in other conferences for leadership or pastoral roles. The transfer of credentials went smoothly for these women.

**3. What do you do to take care of yourself (body, mind, spirit, relationships)? 4. What resources do you draw on to enrich your ministry (people/professionals as well as books/ blogs etc.)?**

Questions 3 & 4 were combined in this summary report as there were significant overlapping answers.

- Key relationships included: spouses, children, siblings, parents, pastors, female pastor groups, local ministerial groups, pastoral teams, housemates,

friends, non-Mennonite friends, Congregation Relations Committee, and pastoral couples.

- Almost all the women had specific and regular exercise commitments: running, walking, biking, swimming, and dancing.
- Several mentioned that eating healthy food was a high priority.
- Others mentioned that being outside in nature or in the gardens was life giving.
- Some receive massage to lower stress.
- Adequate sleep was mentioned numerous times.
- Making time for regular doctor visits was also a priority mentioned.
- Spiritual Disciplines included: spiritual direction (10 out of 11), therapy, Sabbath, prayer/meditation, time alone or silent retreats, journal writing, arts/crafts/theatre/music, as well as baking/cooking/entertaining.
- In terms of literature or continuing education efforts, the women mentioned: social justice material, faith development, Missio Alliance, current events, fiction/science fiction, seminary, Anabaptist Prayer Book, conference leaders and resourcing events, Enneagram material, sabbaticals, local workshops and seminars, blogs, Mennonite publications, Christian literature, book clubs, music weekend at Laurelville Mennonite Camp, AMBS or EMS pastor resourcing events, and poetry.

## **5. What are the greatest obstacles, threats, and challenges to your ministry?**

The responses to this question included a wide range of responses.

- A particular male parishioner makes patronizing comments and can undermine her pastoral authority. There is no window in her office door.
- Motherhood and pastoring can be challenging: pregnancy, nursing/pumping, childcare for evening/weekend hours, inadequate sleep, and role of children and spouse in the congregation
- Loneliness can be a factor. Finding friends beyond the congregation and navigating friendships within the congregation is challenging
- Stereotyped into taking care of more details or clerical organizing
- Less opportunities to preach due to gender
- Wonders whether lead pastor positions will be available when she's ready
- Hard to maintain boundaries between work and home
- Parishioners are so busy it is hard to find volunteers, committee times, or programing slots

- Cultural competency takes ongoing time and effort; translating takes time
- Works so hard that her health suffers and family time gets squeezed
- Hard to deal with strong emotions such as anger and resentment
- More materials for Spanish speaking pastors and teachers, which can be at an affordable cost for a church plant
- The resources for church planters can be planned according to their needs, since the needs are different in each country
- Would like to have interaction with peers in other languages different than English at the Conference
- Most of the women mentioned that the church structures and conference structure are hierarchical and more like a business model. These structures are not life giving for the majority of the women
- Larger churches tend to think they do not have anything to learn from the smaller churches
- Burnout can happen from providing pastoral care, attention to the older adults or refugees
- Recent conference statements and decisions around human sexuality make pastoring more challenging in several contexts
- When some women preach, some people choose not to come to worship. Some women are not invited to help with funerals even when providing pastoral care to the parishioner
- Team dynamics and transitions can cause frustration and overwork
- Being an interim pastor requires intensity and stamina
- Volunteering on conference committees can take significant time
- Congregations have high standards and it's hard to meet them
- Female pastors are often part time and lose out on benefits
- It can be difficult to provide pastoral care to people in the congregation who know you interpret scripture differently from them
- Issues such as dress, jewelry, hair style, lapel mics, and pulpit size are barriers

**6. What do you wish the seminary or conference leaders knew about what it's like to be a woman in ministry?**

**Conference:**

- It appears that young male leaders are given more opportunities at conference events than young women. In general there seem to be more men involved

- Because there was a female at the church prior to me, I have not faced challenges related to my gender
- Numerous women expressed that they are more theologically progressive than many male counterparts in FMC and do not feel safe to express their views
- Some noted that FMC has paid attention to variance on human sexuality but not on congregational interpretation of women in ministry. It seems inconsistent to come down hard on one article and not another
- One woman was turned down as a candidate due to her MLI answer in regards to human sexuality. She wonders how many congregations might respect her view and give her an opportunity to minister
- What efforts is the conference making to open up further opportunities for women to pastor?
- On the other hand, there are many women pastoring, in conference leadership, and on committees. The women are grateful for these opportunities
- The majority of the women expressed deep appreciation for conference staff that support and resource the women to pastor effectively in their contexts
- Not everyone thrives under the hierarchical, business style of leadership common in congregations and the conference. There is a longing for more collaboration, discernment, spiritual awakening, organic process, relational focus, and team building
- Once a woman has a pastoral role, she wants to keep it because she does not know how many other possibilities there will be
- One person mentioned that she's been credentialed since 2011 and has not been asked to serve on a conference committee
- Providing mentors to new pastors is valued
- Geographical distance can be challenging for the building of relationships and for the understanding of cultural contexts
- Further clarify policies and practices related to maternity and medical leaves
- When a congregation is not open to women in ministry, they are not likely open to LGBTQ persons
- When there are women serving as elders, deacons, or oversight board members, it makes it easier for women to serve as pastors

## **Seminaries**

- There were few women in my seminary class and very few female professors
- What education and materials can be made for Spanish speakers/learners?
- One woman noticed how comfortable the classmates were discussing issues of race but not gender
- One male professor gave her a lower grade than the men who were in her group project. She confronted the professor about the discrepancy
- Pastoring small, rural congregations is different from larger, suburban or urban churches. How do pastors in smaller contexts manage friendships?
- Teach more about varying leadership styles and how to run committee or congregational decision making processes

## **Summary**

All of the women sense a deep call to pastoral ministry and can name specific ways the calling emerged and is manifested. All the women are credentialed but have varying experiences with the process. Every woman readily identified practices and resources that strengthen the body, mind, and soul in order to sustain them as pastors. They certainly underscored the challenge of maintaining a healthy and meaningful work/life balance. The obstacles and challenges were numerous. Issues around human sexuality were a theme that emerged frequently. Another predominant threat appeared to be dissatisfaction with the hierarchical, business oriented leadership style that prevails in congregations and conference. Many stories were shared about doors opening and positive relationships but a gap continues to exist for most of the women. As the conference continues to expand into additional cultural contexts, language and resources will be an issue to continue to address. The women expressed deep gratitude to the conference for providing an opportunity for them to be interviewed and for their comments to be shared. There is some interest expressed that the findings be shared with a wider circle than the Credentialing Committee.