

This month, Women by the Numbers examines who is entering the United Methodist ordination system. GCSRW looks at who enters seminary, what their vocational goals are, and where they are during their first two years in ministry in the denomination.

Using data from the General Board of Pension and Health Benefits and from the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, GCSRW found almost 50% of seminary students are women, 40% of those that enter parish ministry in the denomination are women, and 75% of our deacons and 25% of our elders are women.

Who is entering seminary?

In 2014, there was almost an even split between female and male students in United Methodist seminaries—2,065, or 53% were male, and 1,834, or 47% were female. There was a wider gap when looking at all seminaries—66% of students were male and 34% were female.

Data shows that women in seminary were older than men (36-40 versus 31-35 years of age) and 78% of men were married compared to the 53% of women. We do not know how the age and marital status impacts the life of the student and or his/her choice in his/her professional career.

When looking at degree completion data, men and women completed their degrees at a similar rate of 50%. Again, the gap between genders widens when looking at all seminaries, with a 64% completion rate for men and a 36% rate for women. It also seems to take women a little longer than men to complete their degrees (3.21 median years versus 3.06 median years).

What are their vocational goals?

When asked upon graduating seminary, 42% of women indicated they wanted to go into “full-time parish ministry,” compared to 60% of men. There is an 18% difference between men and women. Where do the remainder of the 58% of women and 40% of men want to go out of seminary? And why?

Where are graduates serving?

The following is the breakdown of those who are serving in churches for two or fewer years in 2014, according to the data from the General Board of Pension and Health Benefits (GBPHB):

Gender	2 years or less in parish ministry	Part-Time Local Pastors	Full-Time Local Pastors	Provisional Deacon	Provisional Elder	Deacon in Full Connection	Elder in Full Connection
Female	40%	36%	31%	78%	47%	75%	25%
Male	60%	64%	69%	22%	53%	25%	75%

The numbers above indicate that 40% of clergy with 2 or fewer years of service are women, while 60% are male. This number correlates to the vocational goals stated by seminary students which would indicate that women move into their desired vocational choice in “full-time parish ministry.” It is also important to mention that part- and full-time local pastor categories (while not requiring a theological degree to initially serve in this capacity and therefore not in the initial statistic from GBHEM) are approximately 2/3 male and 1/3 female.

The numbers show us that the majority of deacons are female, with a much higher percentage of them being female at 75% versus male at 25%. When comparing the relative numbers of deacons and elders in full connection, the numbers are reversed with 75% of elders being male and 25% being female.

Victoria Rebeck, the director of deacon ministry development and provisional membership in the Division of Ordained Ministry at the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry states this may be “due to a remaining perception of hierarchical clergy, with elder being seen as more prestigious than deacon.” Rebeck said that, “this, combined with the sexism that still exists in our culture, may mean that people are often talked out of becoming deacons because they are concerned they will have a lesser status.”

Other factors may be contributing as well to the gender imbalance among deacons in the denomination. In her recent article, *The (Mis) Understood Deacon*, Anita Wood of the West Ohio Annual Conference indicated that “many of these women may have become deacons because they are living out some traditional paradigm of the role of women.” Deacons commonly serve beyond the local church as “social workers, advocacy and social justice leaders, health professionals, chaplains and counselors, teachers, administrators and consultants,” (WellSprings Journal).

As mentioned in *Women by the Numbers*, August 2014, these “helper” or “servant” roles are not seen as important as the traditionally authoritative, administrative male roles in society. Until we value every role as equally important-- from helper to administrator--the role of deacon may always be seen as lower in the clergy hierarchy and thus culturally more of a female role.

To read more:

To access the GBHEM Theological School Annual Reports click [HERE](#)

To read "The (Mis) Understood Deacon" by Anita Wood:

<http://www.wellspringsjournal.org/2010/08/the-misunderstood-deacon/>