

Pay gap for women clergy is decreasing, according to new study

Yet challenges remain, with women disproportionately working in part-time and lower-paid jobs.

by [David Briggs](#) in the [August 30, 2017](#) issue

Women ministers are making dramatic strides in achieving equal pay with male clergy.

The gender pay gap shrunk from women clergy making 60 cents on the dollar compared to men in 1976 to 93 cents on the dollar in 2016. This gap is substantially less than the current 22 cent gender disadvantage in the general population, a new study finds.

Yet researchers said there is still evidence of a stained-glass ceiling for women, who are disproportionately working in part-time and lower-paid noncongregational jobs. A separate finding noted that male clergy who work in settings such as church agencies, schools, and hospitals make around 11 percent more than congregational clergy. But there is no such wage benefit for women clergy in jobs outside the congregation, an indication that men are more likely to serve as agency heads or school administrators, while women are more likely to have lower-level positions.

“While our results highlight growth in gender income parity among American clergy, there are still barriers to female mobility within this occupation,” the researchers concluded.

Nor are all boats rising at the same rate with regard to clergy pay. Some 42 percent of the difference in the closing of the gender gap was related to slower increases in compensation for male pastors, researchers said.

Several factors may put further pressure on ministerial wages, notably the rising number of Americans choosing not to affiliate with a religious group, which reduces clergy demand, and economic theories that indicate some occupations are devalued

when they come to be seen as “women’s work.”

“We might be at a point where we see a general devaluation of the clergy occupation,” said lead researcher Cyrus Schleifer.

Researchers have faced difficulties in analyzing gender compensation gaps among clergy and in comparing figures with other occupations. It is hard to find national data with statistically significant numbers of women clergy, and it’s hard to account for the benefits ministers receive in the form of housing allowances or living in church-provided residences.

Schleifer and Amy Miller of the University of Oklahoma analyzed data on working clergy age 18 to 65 from the Annual Social and Economic Supplement of the Current Population Survey from 1976 to 2016.

The survey, administered by the U.S. Census Bureau, is widely used in measuring economic inequalities and provides information on the housing benefits that are a special part of clergy compensation.

The study results were recently published online in *Sociology of Religion*, a peer-reviewed journal. Some of the key findings include:

- While congregations as a matter of religious freedom may hire whomever they want, the income gap between male and female clergy is less than it is between men and women in government agencies that cannot legally discriminate based on gender. “It’s good news for the religious communities,” Schleifer said.
- Some women benefited more than others. Married female clergy make around 28 percent less than male clergy. This may go back in part to the traditional assumption that a male pastor’s wife would serve as unpaid labor; there is no similar expectation for clergy husbands. The study also found that female clergy with children in the home are paid less than female clergy with no children.
- The highest paying jobs still are more likely to go to men. Around 21 percent of female clergy are part-time, compared to only 4 percent of male clergy.
- Male clergy show an average annual increase in income of around 0.2 percent compared to the income of workers in the general population. Female clergy show a faster rate of change at around 1.3 percent each year.

The national study was not able to compare clergy pay by religious groups. But its findings are consistent with other research indicating that gender bias persists in many denominations.

A 2016 survey of 224 clergywomen in the Evangelical Covenant Church found women “have struggled in finding jobs and are concerned over the underrepresentation of women at all levels of leadership.” Some described the denomination as a “good old boys’ club,” reported researcher Lenore M. Knight Johnson of Trinity Christian College.

In the Episcopal Church, Paula Nesbitt, a leading researcher on faith and gender, noted in a report that 2013 pension fund data showed that even among those just starting their ministry, “women earn a median of eight cents less for every dollar a man makes. The gender gap increases to 11 cents less for women with more than five years of credited service or who have reached age 35.”

The findings also seem to give credence to other research on gender bias—sometimes called occupational feminization theory—that suggests that rising numbers of women in an occupation may result in a loss of status and value in the profession as it is seen as more feminine.

Despite these continuing hurdles, Schleifer suggested, “my sense is we’re moving in the right direction” in addressing clergy gender bias. —theARDA.com

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A version of this article, which was edited on August 11, appears in the August 30 print edition under the title “Pay gap for women clergy is decreasing.”