

Report details trends for U.S. women clergy

Among mainline denominations, women are half of the total clergy only in the United Church of Christ, Eileen R. Campbell-Reed's research shows.

by [Christian Century staff](#) in the [November 7, 2018](#) issue

While the percentage of Christian women clergy continues to increase in the United States, at seminaries they are fewer than 25 percent of faculty and deans, and only 11 percent of presidents. And they are still less than half of ordained leaders even in mainline denominations.

Those figures are among the key findings of a recently released report, *State of Clergywomen in the U.S.: A Statistical Update*, by Eileen R. Campbell-Reed, associate professor of practical theology at Central Baptist Theological Seminary and codirector of the Learning Pastoral Imagination Project.

"Women's ordination remains among the more dramatic changes in the history of the church," Campbell-Reed said in a statement.

Her research found that there has not been a comprehensive report on U.S. women clergy for two decades. In that time, the percentage of women pastors in most mainline denominations has doubled or tripled. In the United Church of Christ and Unitarian Universalist denominations, there are the same number of women as men in the clergy.

"Fifty years ago there were virtually no women leading congregations as pastors in America except in a few Pentecostal and a handful of mainline churches," Campbell-Reed wrote in the report. "In the decade of the 1970s growth in women's ordination exploded and continued to rise steadily through the next four decades."

Yet women remain less than a third of students enrolling in M.Div. programs accredited by the Association of Theological Schools. At schools affiliated with mainline churches, women have been about half of students since 1998 but are still only 27 percent of pastors in congregations.

A 2016 survey by ATS showed that “male M.Div. graduates remain more likely than female graduates to receive a job offer by the time of degree completion.”

The percentage of white women enrolling in M.Div. programs dropped from 21 percent in 1998 to 14 percent in 2017, with the 2008 recession appearing to be one factor. The percentage of women of color in seminary has grown from 7 to 11 percent in that period. The report noted that students of color are more likely to plan for “bivocational ministry careers than are white students.”

Combining 2017 figures from the American Baptist Churches USA, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), the Episcopal Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the United Church of Christ, and the United Methodist Church, the study found women made up 32 percent of total clergy.

Women cannot be ordained in the two largest U.S. religious groups: the Roman Catholic Church and the Southern Baptist Convention.

“And yet, worthy of note is a quiet renovation of RCC leadership, which has been underway since Vatican II: the lay leadership of parishes is now significantly larger than the priesthood, and it is chiefly run by women,” Campbell-Reed wrote.

More than 80 percent of Roman Catholic lay ecclesial ministers are women.

The state of clergywomen is varied in historically black denominations. The report cites data showing that women are 50 to 75 percent of members in black Baptist congregations, but less than 10 percent of church leaders and as little as 1 percent of pastors. However, the African Methodist Episcopal Church has ordained women since 1960, and a 2016 report estimated they were 26 percent of congregational pastors in the global denomination.

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