

Allowed to lead? A qualitative investigation of the impact of the stained-glass labyrinth on
women in pastoral leadership in the Evangelical Covenant Church

by

Monica L. Reeves

B.S., Kansas State University, 2000
B.S., Kansas State University, 2000
M.A., Kansas State University, 2019

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Abstract

This qualitative study investigated the experiences of women in pastoral leadership in the Evangelical Covenant Church, seeking to understand how they experience the stained-glass labyrinth and perceive ECC leadership amid their challenges (Lauve-Moon, 2021). A denomination that has ordained women since 1976, the ECC serves as a unique case study, and specific attention was given to its organization Advocates for Covenant Clergy Women. The ACCW seeks to come alongside women as they need support and to advocate for change. The group's motto captures the challenges at the local church level, "until the culture of our churches matches the ethos of the denomination, we have work to do" (ACCW, Home, n.d.).

To investigate the experiences of women in pastoral leadership in the ECC, the following research questions guided this study:

RQ1: In what ways are women experiencing the stained-glass labyrinth (SGL) in the ECC?

RQ2: What are participants' perceptions of ECC leadership and their support of women?

RQ3: How does the ACCW affect the experience of the SGL for women?

Role congruity theory and feminist standpoint theory provided an effective theoretical framework to understand women's experiences and consider how structure and culture impact the SGL. Guided by an interpretive and critical methodology, I conducted 38 interviews with women in the ECC who have served or currently serve in a pastoral leadership role, while also using a contextual reading of documents to examine ECC messaging. Findings point to how the ECC structure creates and supports continued problems for women. Many participants view the ECC's commitment to a "freedom to disagree" as a strength of the denomination. But when misapplied, this tenet combined with a structure design that gives most power to the local level,

women face additional obstacles in their leadership pursuits. With the local church level holding power to break from the ECC's commitment to women in leadership, women face an impossible hurdle and instead are discouraged from pursuing pastoral jobs in certain regions or churches. In short, practice does not match policy and though this is a reality that many ECC leaders recognize, to date nothing has been done to hold churches accountable.

This study focuses on the mental, emotional, and physical toll that the SGL has on women in pastoral leadership in the ECC. Participants shared mainly positive impressions of ECC national leadership, though they recognize that there are problems at the regional and local level. I argue that the weight of these burdens could be lessened greatly if the ECC functioned with consistency between their identity and policies and enforced their commitment to women at every level. The ACCW is a strong resource and though many participants were not familiar with everything they do, most spoke positively about its existence, and many discussed a desire to get more involved. However, the weight of this work should not fall on the women and men in the ACCW, but rather ECC leadership should work to be more consistent in its policy and practice.

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Approved by:

Major Professor
Colene J. Lind

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Your love is just the antidote when nothing else can cure me

There are times I can't decide, when I can't tell up from down

You make me feel less crazy when otherwise I'd drown

But you pick me up and brush me off and tell me I'm OK

Sometimes that's just what we need to get us through the day.

(Sarah McLachlan, *Push*)

Dedication

To the women who faithfully serve in pastoral leadership past and present and to the young girls who will step into those roles in the future – may you all enjoy an easier path to leadership because of this work.

To my grandmothers who modeled hard work, leadership, and positivity in ways that made me believe my career goals had no limits. To my parents who always supported me, taught me to persevere, and showered my sister and I with so much love.

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Chapter 1 - The Stained-glass Labyrinth¹

When I came on as the interim pastor, there was one couple who left the church based on my gender. They didn't even meet me. It was just they theologically felt that it was not the right thing. And it just so happened that the first elderly person who died in the church was the father of this guy who had left the church with his wife. I went to . . . meet with his family, you know, the next day. This was the first time we had met, too. We hadn't actually met face to face until his father had just died. I extended a hand, and he did not shake my hand. Like his dad had just died, but he couldn't shake my hand. But I, you know . . . he had something in his mind, you know . . . but for me, it was . . . this was not a moment for me to be pushing for anything but care for this family that had lost a loved one, you know? I can remember in that moment, even though like it was on the one hand, I wanted to completely discount this guy. I also remember being in tears talking to God and just saying, is there a chance he's right here? And I just, once again, just felt God saying, you are called, like you are called. And if you're going to be faithful to me, you're going to keep pursuing this call.

(Pastor M)²

This incident demonstrates the discrimination that women in pastoral leadership encounter and the inner turmoil it can create. Women in male-dominated fields often face opposition to their leadership. Christian ministry is no exception. Many churches across the U.S. still do not allow women to be ordained, preach, or serve in formal roles of leadership. In denominations such as the Evangelical Covenant Church (ECC), women face no official limits

¹ Portions of this dissertation were originally written in coursework completed for the fulfillment of this degree.

² Initials used do not match the names of participants to protect their anonymity.

on their leadership according to the denomination's projected identity and its policies. In fact, the ECC has been ordaining women since 1976. Yet experiences like those of Pastor M's demonstrate that the obstacles that women encounter are ever present.

Since the 1970s, the number of women serving as clergy members has continued to increase, yet they still make less money, hold fewer senior positions, and serve in smaller congregations (Lauve-Moon, 2021; Schleifer & Miller, 2017; Walker, 2019). Many scholars have noted inequities in opportunities for women across denominations, such as Black women in the Pentecostal church finding it challenging to advance to senior leadership (Walker, 2019). In the Foursquare church, a denomination founded by a woman, Aimee Semple McPherson, women are not as numerous in leadership, though denominational statements claim equality (Waite, 2022). Church statements of policy and identity declare that women are welcome in leadership, but this is not reality. This rings true even within denominations such as the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship (CBF), a group that began in 1991, in part to support equality for women leaders (Lauve-Moon, 2021). Baptist seminaries are made up of almost equal numbers of women and men, yet only 5 percent of CBF churches have a female senior pastor (Lauve-Moon, 2021). Between 2013 and 2018, research on megachurches³ revealed that .84 percent were led by a female pastor (Bowler, 2019).

The barriers that women face are well documented in the broader context of Christian denominations and seminaries (see Barr, 2021; Chaves, 1997; Lauve-Moon, 2021; Weaver-Swartz, 2023). Women manage increased scrutiny, doubts about their leadership, and discrimination that restricts their advancement. This study draws attention to the weight these

³ A megachurch is defined as a Protestant congregation with at least 2000 attendees on a weekly basis (Bowler, 2019).

obstacles place on women. They must constantly and closely consider their words and actions to not offend and to heed lines that only exist because of gender bias and prejudice. They must cater to others and are asked to give space and time to those who do not support them, accepting misogyny as part of the job, and they serve faithfully despite opposition. One of the most devastating results of this discrimination is when they come to question their own calling, as noted above by Pastor M. For all these reasons and more, women in pastoral leadership in the ECC need to be heard.

The only way to begin to understand the weight that they carry is to ask them about their experiences and listen to their stories, told in their own words. This dissertation seeks to understand women's experiences by listening to and learning from them. The ECC needs to hear from women to understand the full impact of the practice-policy gap on its female leaders and congregations. A thorough telling of these experiences can inform needed cultural, policy, and practical changes. As community-engaged scholarship, this study brings theory and rigorous methods to bear on an important problem in leadership and organizational communication, while also providing actionable findings to help the ECC address an ongoing challenge relevant to many groups. With this focus in mind, the following chapter outlines the policy-practice gap in the ECC, the definition and the depth of the stained-glass labyrinth, and the urgency of addressing this reality in the denomination.

The Policy-Practice Gap

Organizational history and culture, discrimination, and unfair gender expectations all contribute to the policy-practice gap. Inconsistency between the policies and practices in denominations that ordain women stems partially from patriarchal tradition as well as a deep fear of change. Many Christians are suspicious of any variation from what they have previously

experienced in their religious institutions. When policies evolve, critics raise concern that cultural influences, rather than adherence to religious texts, are driving the change. To address these concerns, the ECC explicitly assures members with the following,

the changes affecting women in the modern era have obviously influenced the Church's thinking, but the ministry of women is neither derived from society's ideas nor a partner to its extremes. For a tradition that is based on the question "Where is it written?" only one foundation is satisfactory for having women minister in the name of Jesus Christ. Women ought to minister not because society says so but because the Bible leads the Church to such a conclusion. (Johnston et al., n.d., p. 1)

This statement appears to make the ECC's stance clear, yet congregations within the denomination – some quietly, some openly – refuse women's leadership. Blatant discrimination is allowed partially due to another policy that must be considered, the ECC's commitment to a "policy on freedom (which) applies to doctrinal issues that might tend to divide but are easily resolved when we share a respect for each other's positions" (Mann, 2004, p. 15). This means that pastors, as well as members of the congregation, are called to extend freedom to others to hold another view on issues where the Bible "seems to allow for a variety of interpretations of the will and purposes of God" (Covenant Affirmations, 2005, p. 19). A document for pastors states that pastors must submit to the church's position when they personally disagree or step down from their role if that is not possible (Freedom and Responsibility: Dissent and Covenant Clergy, n.d.).

This freedom policy should not extend to any practice that discriminates against women, since the ECC affirms in many places that the policy on women leading is based on a clear interpretation of Scripture. As one ECC document states,

we believe we have a mandate to confirm their call, to provide avenues for them to fulfill it in our local churches, and to respect and support their ministry and leadership.

Therefore, we ask those who expect theological freedom to reciprocate by respecting the freedom of women to exercise their God-given gifts. (Mann, 2004, p. 16)

In other words, though an individual may personally disagree with a woman serving as a pastor, all ECC members and staff are required to set this conviction aside and to not hinder any woman pastor from leading.

Nevertheless, statistics and anecdotes establish that some staffers, laity, and even entire congregations routinely reject and impede women in pastoral leadership in the ECC. Though opposition at the conference (regional) level has lessened, barriers remain and the organization publicly recognizes that “the question facing the Covenant today is not whether women can be ordained, but whether the church will fully receive the gifts it has already affirmed” (The Covenant Companion, 2026, para. 10). Women face discrimination and unfair gender expectations that are allowed to flourish within the organizational structure of the ECC. The ECC’s own regular reports document continuing inequity between men and women pastors in jobs available, promotions, seniority, and size of congregations they lead (Dodson 2026;

Johnson, 2017; The Covenant Companion, 2026; see Fig. 1.1;).

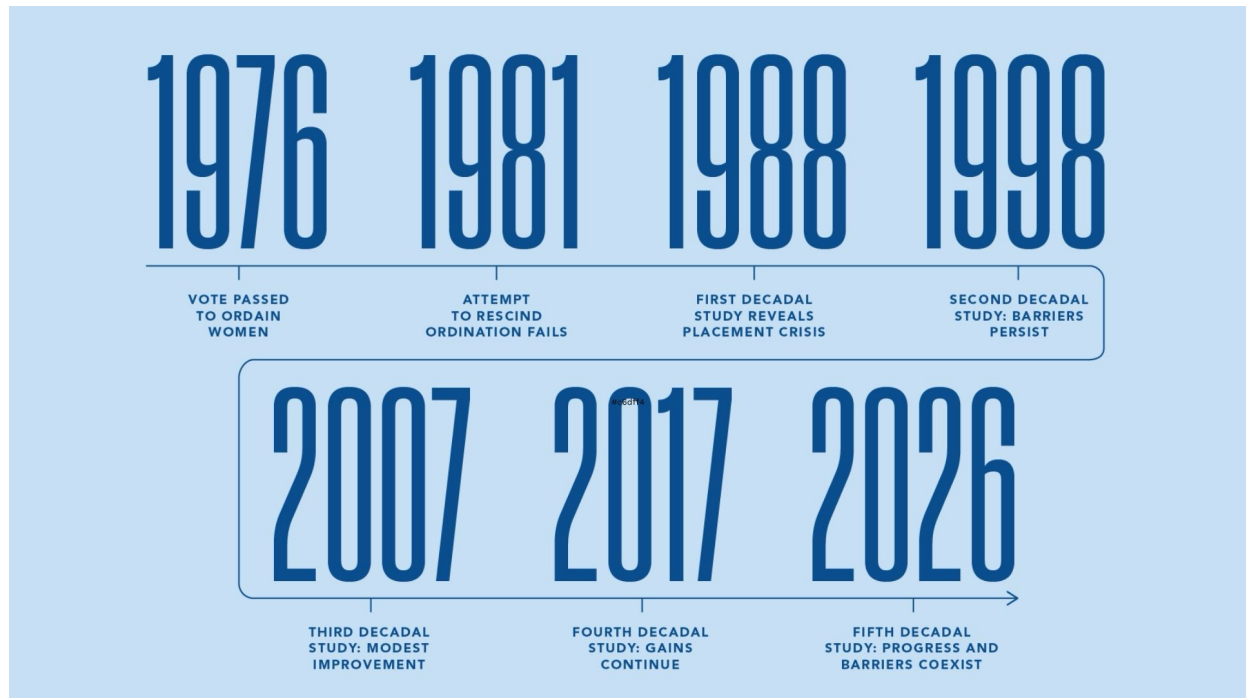


Figure 1.1. Summary of Decennial ECC Studies (The Covenant Companion, 2026, *Fifty years after yes*)

Because there is no question that women pastors of the ECC face discrimination and challenges to their leadership 50 years after their ordination became church policy, this dissertation focuses on the emotional, mental, and physical toll on women in pastoral leadership. The potential for self-doubt and insecurity in being denied one's vocational calling, as expressed by Pastor M, is shaped by condescending comments, direct attacks on women's authority, and painful interactions with congregants and colleagues. In a previous church, Pastor D encountered a fellow ECC staff person who was not aligned on other justice-related issues with the ECC. This contributes to lingering feelings when entering any ECC space now. She explained her inner dialogue this way while visiting a neighboring ECC church's leadership team:

are all these people okay with a woman trying to lead a church? Like I really don't feel confident in that walking into a space. And I don't like that. Like, I wish I could walk into any Covenant church and everyone would be like, oh, obviously you can be the pastor.

(Pastor D)

These are the moments that could go unnoticed. With no direct questioning of her authority in that setting, Pastor D would not have an incident to report to ECC leadership. But the environment that has been cultivated in some ECC churches creates a tension for women. Even when serving in a pastoral role in a setting that affirms their leadership, the knowledge of this inconsistency across the denomination sticks with them as Pastor D shared. Women deserve a chance to freely talk about all that is happening, both what is known and apparent and the pressures and frustrations in the background.

It is time for the ECC to recognize that the policy-practice gap for women causes an additional level of harm. To my point, women who attend ECC's own seminary, North Park Theological Seminary, spend four years or more with their leadership affirmed, applauded, and encouraged, only to learn after graduation that some churches within the denomination will not even look at their resume. What are the personal and organizational consequences of proclaiming to women that the ECC welcomes their leadership while in fact not everyone in the ECC does?

Professors at North Park acknowledge the problems, offering some mental preparation for graduates. However, most of the organizational messaging overlooks this reality and promises unlimited opportunities for women to lead. It is pertinent to consider the role that underlying discrimination, unrecognized gender bias, and structural problems all play in creating and supporting the systems that hold women back. Understanding the stained-glass labyrinth is

central to grasping a clearer picture of the lived reality of women in pastoral leadership in the ECC.

The Stained-glass Labyrinth Defined

The glass ceiling paradigm was introduced in 1978 by management consultant Marilyn Loden during a panel discussion on women's advancement (Loden, 2017). She observed how critical the other women on the panel were about their gender's shortcomings, and she took the opportunity to point out the underlying obstacles that held women back, arguing that "the 'invisible glass ceiling' – the barriers to advancement that were cultural not personal – was doing the bulk of the damage to women's career aspirations and opportunities" (Loden, 2017, Introduction section, para. 4). The term gained traction and a 1986 Wall Street Journal article helped familiarize the concept for the public (Federal Glass Ceiling Commission, 1995).

A concentrated focus on studying this reality continued with the Glass Ceiling Commission, from 1991-1996, a U.S. Department of Labor effort that was created by the Civil Rights Act of 1991 to study "those artificial barriers based on attitudinal or organizational bias that prevent qualified individuals from advancing upward in their organization into management-level positions" (U.S. Department of Labor, 1991, p. 1). This entity studied the phenomenon for women and ethnic minorities. Today the term glass ceiling speaks to the reality for women and people of color. Though some differentiate between distinctive obstacles that men of color face and do not see this as an all-inclusive concept, numerous researchers have confirmed through decades of work that "there is indeed a barrier only rarely penetrated by women or persons of color" (Cotter et al., 2001; Federal Glass Ceiling Commission, 1995, p. iii).

In more recent years, the framework has expanded, and additional terms have evolved to more accurately portray the complicated aspects of this barrier, such as "glass labyrinth" and

“glass cliff” (Eagly & Carli, 2007, p. 87; Zhang & Basha, 2023, p. 491). As Eagly and Carli (2007) observe to “make better progress, it’s time to rename the challenge” (p. 149). For women in religious settings, the stained-glass ceiling refers to the leadership barrier that has been well documented since the mid-1990s (Danberry, 2017; Sullins, 2000; Walker, 2019; Weaver-Swartz, 2023). As the glass ceiling hinders women from reaching the highest levels of leadership in many career fields, scholars describe the same dynamic in religious settings with a more colorful metaphor, that being the “stained-glass labyrinth” (Lauve-Moon, 2021, p. 46; see also Danberry, 2017; Sullins, 2000; Walker, 2019; Weaver-Swartz, 2023). The labyrinth is a more accurate image of the countless obstacles that impede the careers of women, rather than one single barrier that the ceiling imagery conveys (Lauve-Moon, 2021).

Unfortunately, it has not disappeared simply through written policy and denominational endorsement of women in pastoral leadership. Research shows that in the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, as “power, authority, and status decrease, the number of women increases” (Lauve-Moon, 2021, p. 28). An investigation into other denominations would most likely show similar numbers as the lack of women in senior pastor positions continues to be a problem across Christianity.

Progress is Not Automatic

It is tempting to think that progress will continue. The 1960s helped bring more equality through the Civil Rights Movement and specific legislation for women and people of color. In 1974, women gained access to credit for the first time (Smithsonian American Women’s History Museum, 2024). Though credit was used more routinely since the 1950s, single women typically needed a male family member to co-sign a loan even if their income was higher and married women could only get a card in their husband’s name (Smithsonian American Women’s History

Museum, 2024). In the 1980s and 1990s, prime-time TV began to portray more women working in settings other than the home (Glascock, 2001). Though none of these steps forward were flawless, nor did they mean that all obstacles were removed, these changes were moving in the right direction and created at least marginal improvements for women.

Within Christianity, there is a complicated history for women, and today a wide range of allowable behaviors exists across churches with varied theologies. Some astutely point out the regression of power and position for women after the time of Jesus (Barr, 2021; Kateusz, 2019). Patriarchy and decisions made by males in power have often relegated women to supporting roles at best and dismissed them completely at worst. Yet some denominations have been ordaining women for decades. The American Baptists proclaim their commitment to women, stating that ordination of women within their tradition began in the 1800s (Wingfield, 2023). The Presbyterian Church-USA ordained their first woman pastor in 1956, the same year that the United Methodist Church extended fully clergy rights to women (Hunter, 2016; United Methodist Church, 2026). Other mainline protestant denominations like the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America joined in this progressive change in 1970 (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 2019; Wingfield, 2023). The ECC began ordaining women in 1976 and proclaims their belief that “the biblical basis for service in the body of Christ is giftedness, a call from God, and godly character – not gender” (Mann, 2004, p. 5).

The women’s liberation movement in the 1970s helped to open doors for women in churches, as it did elsewhere (Lauve-Moon, 2021). More women are pursuing Master of Divinity degrees than they did in the 1970s (Chaves, et al., 2021). The policies are in place, the opportunities for education and employment are present, and women should be serving in senior pastor roles with full support of denominational leadership and congregations. However, a

deeper look reveals that a small minority of women now serve as senior pastors, and that number is not increasing as quickly as it should.

Although the number of women enrolling in MDiv programs did initially increase as denominations and seminaries began offering more opportunities in the 1970s, the percentage of women enrolled topped out at 31.5 % in 2002, and after dropping slightly, it has been around 30% since then (Chaves, et al., 2021). In U.S. congregations across different faiths, the National Congregations Study (NCS) found that women lead only 13.5% of Christian congregations (Chaves, et al., 2021; Lauve-Moon, 2021; National Congregations Study, n.d.). That is only a small increase from the first NCS conducted in 1998, when women led in 10.6% of Christian churches. In the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship (CBF) only 5% of senior pastors are women, only increasing to 6.5 % when the “co-pastor” title is included (Lauve-Moon, 2021, p. 27). Though higher, only 18% of churches in the ECC have a woman serving in a lead or co-lead pastor role in 2026 (The Evangelical Covenant Church, Gather 2026: Called and gifted panel, 2026.). While this is a significant increase from around 6% in 2017, many women reported in the ECC’s 2025 study that they have had a negative experience in the job search process (The Evangelical Covenant Church, Gather 2026: Called and gifted panel, 2026; Dodson, 2026). Beyond that, women point to aspects of the organizational culture that remain difficult. Responding to a survey question in the 2025 study about what they find discouraging, one woman shared the following frustration. The reference to Gather is her experience at the ECC annual meeting of delegates and clergy from across the denomination.

Having churches in (the) search process refuse to look at my profile. Having questions about the legitimacy of women’s ordination occasionally pop up from the floor at Gather. It is rare but whenever it happens, I think, “where have you been the last 50 years!?! Why

do you think this is appropriate to ask in this forum?” Seeing Covenant colleagues uplift the voices of popular public pastors, leaders, or figures who do NOT believe women should be pastors without giving that caveat.

Though numbers are improving, ECC leadership and its own women in pastoral leadership affirm the issues that still exist. Research illustrates that the top positions remain elusive in many churches where women can lead, including within the ECC.

In June of 2026, the Southern Baptist Convention passed the first stage of a ban on all churches that have women pastors or even allow women to preach (Smietana, 2026). This clear statement against women in leadership follows their monumental change in 2000, when they established their view on gender and church leadership, “while both men and women are gifted for service in the church, the office of pastor is limited to men as qualified by Scripture” (The Baptist Faith and Message, Article VI the Church, n.d.; Shellnut, 2022). The reality at that time was that though “fewer than one-tenth of one percent of the 41,099 Southern Baptist churches (had) a woman serving as senior pastor,” the SBC saw a need to revise its statement in 2000 to specify that only men could serve in this role (Ledbetter, 2000). Although some prominent figures, such as Pastor Rick Warren, have challenged this view, the official policy remains clear (Shellnut, 2022). Women are unwelcome in pastoral leadership, and there is no pretending otherwise. The 2026 decision reinforces this more strongly, and it passed by an overwhelming majority (Smietana, 2026).

On the other hand, it is a refreshing to peruse the ECC website and see that women are appointed to pastoral and other leadership roles. Like the churches that exclude women, the ECC’s view is based on biblical interpretation, and it holds to an unwavering commitment to take direction solely from this book. While others use scripture to defend the subjugation of

women, the ECC expresses its theological reasoning through Bible passages to support the opposite view.

Sometimes patriarchy is obvious, clear, and proudly endorsed. Denominations including the SBC and seminaries such as Southern Baptist Theological seminary are strident voices supporting this repressive perspective (Lauve-Moon, 2021; Weaver-Swartz, 2023). Though other churches and seminaries appear to be beacons of light for women who hear a call to lead, scholars continue to find that the stained-glass labyrinth still exists. Women pastors in the ECC cannot fulfill their leadership potential if things continue as they are. The reality of patriarchy and gendered expectations limit opportunities for advancement and add pressures that are unique to women's experience (Barr, 2021; Eagly & Karau 2002; Webb, 2022). Further analysis is needed to fully understand why these barriers persist, especially in places where policy exists to combat inequality. The most effective way to approach solutions to this gap is to hear from the women in pastoral leadership themselves. The ECC's decennial studies illustrate their commitment to seek out women's input on their current reality. The existence of the ACCW also shows that the denomination is in favor of supporting women and they have provided a platform for the ACCW at their annual meetings. Listening to women's stories is crucial and implementing their ideas for solving this issue would confirm the ECC's dedication to remove the gap and create a more equal leadership experience for all.

Moving From Problems to Solutions

It is commendable that the ECC recognizes that problems still exist. At the recent annual gathering for pastors, a panel was hosted honoring the 50th anniversary of the ordination of women while also simultaneously acknowledging that women still face unnecessary hurdles in

their leadership (Evangelical Covenant Church, Midwinter Tuesday afternoon breakout, 2026). Though acknowledgment of the problems is a positive sign, this is not enough.

The title of this dissertation, *Allowed to Lead?* points to a question that should not need to be asked. ECC leadership would say that this question has been answered with a resounding “yes, women lead here.” There is no stated policy that would require a woman to receive permission to lead, and all ECC churches should be aligned to this identity. Yet obstacles abound that are rooted in patriarchal tradition and unfair gender expectations that conflict with the ECC’s policies and claimed identity. To elucidate why these obstacles exist by listening directly to those who experience discrimination, I completed 38 interviews of women who have served, or currently serve, in pastoral leadership within the ECC. Most have served in a paid position though some are unpaid and/or have chosen not to pursue a pastoral position after seminary for a variety of reasons.

Completing qualitative interviews provided a powerful avenue for hearing women’s stories, allowing for elaboration and detail that a survey could not capture. In addition, this method allowed me to learn about the organization, Advocates for Covenant Clergy Women (ACCW). This support organization within the ECC is an important entity to consider, and one of my research questions focused on understanding how the ACCW affects the experience of the stained-glass labyrinth (hereafter, SGL). Limited information about the ACCW was available online at the start of my study though ACCW websites now have more content and clarity. Asking participants personally about their knowledge of the ACCW helped me learn about what the organization does and what impact it may or may not have on women’s experiences with the SGL.

Using role congruity theory and feminist standpoint theory gave me the framing need to understand women's experiences and consider the impact that larger cultural and structural beliefs have in limiting their leadership opportunities. Similarly designing this as a critical interpretive qualitative interview study helped me appreciate the lived reality of women while considering broader forces at work. Through a qualitative thematic analysis of interviews and documents, I focused on messages that were communicated by leadership and the role of the ACCW. Since my research centers on perception of the SGL, ECC leadership, and the ACCW, open-ended questions guided the interviews.

Why the ECC?

This work is not the first attempt to better understand the differences between policy and practice within the ECC. Since the ordination of women began in 1976, numerous initiatives and resolutions have attempted to address the limitations that women endure. Dr. Lenore Knight Johnson and Rev. Dr. Devyn Chambers Johnson have provided insightful work on the key aspect of organizational culture. Johnson (2017) discusses the deeper dynamics in place that do not align with statements of policy, while Chambers Johnson (2020) affirms this reality as she completed an action research study with ECC women clergy to investigate the issues that they face. Ten years after women's ordination passed, the denomination conducted a survey among women in the ECC that they have continued to complete every 10 years (Johnson, 2017). Yet despite some progress in recent years, the policy-practice gap persists.

Three main reasons justify the choice to study this gap and its impact on women pastors within the ECC. Firstly, though currently celebrating 50 years of women's ordination, a recent study confirmed that barriers still exist for women, such as being expected to do the work of a pastor without the title (Dodson, 2026). As one participant said in the 2025 study, "I was co-

leading the church, but the council didn't want to call it that because I was a woman" (Dodson, 2026, p. 94). In chapter four, I further detail these aspects of the labyrinth as revealed by interviewees.

Secondly, the ACCW exists to help women name and overcome discrimination and obstacles of the SGL. The existence of this group can either be a sign of hope that the denomination wants to work on these issues, or an indication that deeper problems exist amid the clear policies of the ECC as a place for women to lead without restrictions. This is deserving of study to determine the impact of the work the ACCW is doing and the potential for it to be an impetus for further change.

Third and finally, the ECC distinguishes itself from other denominations in its commitment to six basic tenets that shape the church. Collectively, this foundation helps "us to have good conversations even when we hold differing perspectives around viewpoints that can feel like hot button topics" (Swanson-Draheim, 2023, para. 2). Since its beginning, the denomination has sought "in essentials, unity; in nonessentials, liberty; in all things, charity" (Swanson-Draheim, 2023, para. 2). This claim to be able to hold in tension two opposing sides of an issue can be a strength and the openness to a diversity of views sets the denomination apart from others. However, this complicates the issue of leadership for women. Some interpret this freedom to include allowing churches and pastors to publicly disagree with women leading and to present a patriarchal view as the only choice. This aspect of the ECCs identity makes this denomination a unique case study for investigating the SGL.

Even a quick glance of the ECC website shows that the denomination seeks to provide leadership and ministry opportunities for all. Women are pictured on their site teaching and leading and under resources, "women in ministry" is separated out as a topic with multiple

articles offered for further reading (The Evangelical Covenant Church, Resources, n.d.). Their core Office Leadership Team of 10 has five women and one of those women, Reverend Tammy Swanson-Draheim, currently serves as the first female president of the denomination (The Evangelical Covenant Church, Covenant office leadership team, n.d.).

To be sure, this endorsement of women's leadership must be acknowledged as progress. As noted, many denominations do not allow women to serve as pastors, holding views that deliberately exclude women. Their comparable websites present the opposite perspective. The ECC websites illustrate that women are appointed to leadership roles and that resources are offered to support them. For the ECC to embrace its identity and reflect this reality consistently, the barriers of the SGL must be addressed.

Community-engaged Research

This study examines the experiences of women in leadership within the ECC denomination, as well as the ECC's efforts to support and advocate for them. Using community-engaged research, this study allowed participants to provide insights to shape solutions. Present-day engaged research has roots in the 1980s as scholars and students sought to reconnect to academia's role in civic service (Hartley & Saltmarsh, 2016). Collaboration is key in this approach as the researcher and participants are "cocreators of knowledge" and all "talents, knowledge, and experiences of participants" are highly valued (Hartley & Saltmarsh, 2016, p. 62). Rather than designs that are detached from participants and centered on the researcher's interpretation alone, this study seeks to work alongside women in pastoral leadership to better understand their struggles and move toward positive change within the ECC and beyond. Beginning with this initial interview process to understand their experiences, findings will then be shared with participants to continue communication about potential next steps. I plan to

continue engagement with participants and ECC leadership upon completion of this work. Initially this design is focused on the informing stage of engagement, with the goal of moving toward consultation and more involvement with stakeholders (Kansas State University, n.d.). Several participants in various levels of leadership expressed interest in my findings, as have ACCW members. There is great potential for impact as I partner with them in possible next steps.

Community-generated Solutions for ECC and Beyond

Findings indicate five main ways the SGL is experienced by women in pastoral leadership in the ECC. These are lack of career opportunity, the challenges of the ECC design for local leadership and power, communication to and about women, gender-based expectations, and additional challenges faced by women of color that go beyond the scope of this study but deserve to be acknowledged. Within these challenges, participants discussed their thoughts on ECC policies and resources, seminary experiences, messages from leadership, the inconsistency they see between policy and practice and the two interpretations of the freedom tenet, as well as the change in the ethos of the ECC that many observed. Thoughts on the ACCW and the role that male pastors could play in helping leadership opportunities increase were also mentioned. My concurrent contextual reading of ECC documents and websites enriched my understanding of the denomination's position and messaging as well as the work of the ACCW. The SGL is strong within the ECC, despite the attempt of some leadership past and present to dismantle it. This study's design allowed for in-depth analysis of the experiences of women to provide helpful feedback for the ECC on what could help women thrive in their pursuit of leadership.

Implications are substantial for the ECC and beyond. Research tells us that women's leadership experiences across career fields typically involve similar challenges. Women

everywhere would benefit from organizational leaders who commit to creating a supportive environment, and who show a sincere interest in asking questions, listening, and caring about their answers. Taking responsibility for missteps and current structural flaws and an unsupportive work culture is as important as leaders who will increase additional support for women. Seeking consistency across all levels of a company communicates to employees that they are welcome, affirmed, and needed. Support groups like the ACCW, mentoring groups, and other avenues of assistance are substantial as is effort to align all departments and regions to the identity of equality that is proclaimed. Though the data from this study is unique to the ECC, the implications are much bigger for all women and other marginalized groups.

Conclusion

The following chapters describe the design, findings, and implications for this work. Chapter two details my theoretical framework and the context of the ECC. The ECC's history and policies make it a unique case study for considering the policy-practice gap and RCT and FST provide a framework to understand how organizational structure and culture shape the SGL in the denomination. Clear policies, supportive messaging from ECC leadership, and a 50-year history in support of women should indicate that opportunities for women are unlimited. This framework provided a way to analyze issues and structures that are impeding the leadership of women.

Chapter three covers the methodology and methods used. This study is a critical interpretive qualitative interview study. This approach allowed me to understand participants' experiences and investigate how discrimination, bias, and larger structures hinder women's leadership advancement. Qualitative interviews and a contextual reading of documents allowed

me to hear directly from women and to analyze messaging from ECC leadership while concept coding allowed for looking at deeper messages within the words spoken.

Chapter four clarifies and recounts the findings. Despite ECC messaging of active inclusion and the existence of the ACCW, structural aspects, direct discrimination, and gendered expectations lead to an inconsistency between policy and practice, and women experience the SGL in many ways. This chapter attempts to paint an accurate picture of participants' experiences within the ECC. Their perception of ECC leadership remains mostly positive, yet their honest and vulnerable sharing of their experiences reveals that barriers are real and painful. The policy-practice gap within the ECC is taking a toll and their feedback on what could be done to lessen the SGL impact is powerful and has the potential to create real change.

Chapter five provides direction for next steps for the ECC and other organizations. This study provides a deeper understanding of the SGL for women in pastoral leadership in the ECC, giving a picture of the price that women pay and providing direction to help ECC leadership match practice to policy. Chapter five aims to challenge the ECC and any organization that sees a gap between their proclaimed identity and the lived reality for employees. These findings should be considered by other organizations, religious and secular, and point to the need for evaluating the lived experiences of employees, especially those in marginalized communities.

The results of my research serve as reminder to the ECC, the reader, and other organizations about the human cost behind the stained-glass labyrinth. This is not simply a concept to study, an issue to acknowledge, or a problem to solve. To be sure, it is those things, but it is also a weight and a burden, invisible at times, that is taking a toll on women serving in these roles. The impact is exponential with congregations missing out on being led by well-qualified women and younger generations lacking role models and the representation that can

help open doors for women in the future. Ultimately it hurts the ECC. They talk proudly and openly about how long they have affirmed women and even when those words are sincere and well-intentioned, they can sound empty to women who cannot find a first or second job. This incongruency between their identity and some of their own churches creates confusion, disappointment, and unnecessary heartache for women who are simply trying to do what they are called to do. Though fewer women may leave the ECC today than in the earliest generations of leaders, some are moving on and feeling forced into that decision due to the lack of opportunity

It is my goal to honor the stories shared so openly with me and to report their words clearly, providing the reader with a deeper understanding of their lived reality. Though at times the SGL seems solidly in place with no chance of breaking, I believe there could be significant change in a denomination with talented women who are impacting their congregants daily.

A return to the story of Pastor M reveals some hope for change and the damage that could be avoided. She shared the following as she considered how to respond to the man's refusal to shake her hand.

So I think I was probably calling mentors and asking for advice you know. And it was like, well, this is the church that I'm pastoring. So I want to serve as host. I don't need to . . . push my way into anything. But I will be a part of this service, you know. We worked out a plan. And it worked. And he did shake my hand at the luncheon after. And I think it was really interesting for my congregation, I think, because a lot of them, you know, it's a small town, so people know each other and there were family relations too and all that. So I think for my people to see how I handled that and how he handled that, like . . . I think, I don't know, it just was oddly a good experience, even though it was also a bad experience. And, you know, I'll just never forget one of our little ladies who was a second

cousin to the guy who had died. And she said you know, I can't remember if she was telling me that her husband said this or I think it was her husband said, well, you can do my funeral, Pastor M. You know, like, I'm just so sorry that this happened, you know. And I just was like, it's all right. You know, it's all right.

(Pastor M)

Her response showcases the positive impact that can come from pain, as she acknowledged how this affected her congregation and resulted in an encouraging comment from a congregant. Yet it also shows the unnecessary burden that women must carry. The refusal to shake her hand came from a person outside of her congregation and is an example of discrimination that women in pastoral leadership will continue to encounter, just as challenges will remain for all marginalized groups. But for women in pastoral leadership in the ECC, the SGL could be better navigated by women pastors if denominational leadership took seriously the pain it has caused and made changes to be consistent, clear, and committed to the women who so faithfully serve in their congregations. Pastor M assured her parishioner, “it’s all right, you know it’s all right.” This acceptance of difficulties and internal questions around their leadership are normal for many women, but they need not be when organizational changes could dramatically improve their experiences. The ECC has a responsibility to address the policy-practice gap and the stained-glass labyrinth to lessen the negative impact on women and match ECC identity to reality.

Chapter 2 - Theory and Context

I'd be a fearless leader

I'd be an alpha type

When everyone believes ya

What's that like?

I'm so sick of running as fast as I can

Wondering if I'd get there quicker if I was a man

I'm so sick of them coming at me again

Because if I was a man

Then I'd be the man

— Taylor Swift, *The Man*

Swift's song "The Man" captures the exhaustion and frustration that come from living under increased critique, double standards, and systems that favor men. The inequality that exists in the ECC is not an anomaly but a reflection of broader society and patriarchy that is entrenched in the United States. Organizations must recognize that "gendered processes are mutually reinforcing in ways that produce (or resist) inequitable outcomes between men and women as well as ways in which these organizations reinforce (or resist) a large gender structure on the societal level" (Lauve-Moon, 2021, p. 197). These forces are intertwined and point to the importance of admitting the existence of gender bias and blatant discrimination, then making intentional effort to engage in the difficult work needed to see change. The ECC's 50-year milestone of women's ordination offers an opportunity to evaluate progress and face reality.

"Until the culture of our churches matches the ethos of the denomination, we have work to do" (ACCW, *Home*, n.d.). The ACCW's motto summarizes the motivation to investigate and

improve conditions for marginalized groups. In this case, the obstacles that women in pastoral leadership face in the ECC are substantial, discouraging, and destructive for individuals and the organization. The ECC's history and policies make it a unique case study for considering the policy-practice gap, and role congruity theory (RCT) and feminist standpoint theory (FST) provide a framework to understand how organizational structure and culture shape the SGL in the denomination.

Because the ECC is a part of and influenced by social structures and attitudes that discriminate against women in leadership, I draw on these theories to ground the exploration of the experiences of women and the underlying dynamics that are shaping their reality. Both theories support in-depth analysis that ask crucial questions about expectations, norms, and discrimination both blatant and unconscious. Gathering information directly from women in pastoral leadership is vital to understand their experiences and interrogate the larger structures and forces at work.

Eagly and Karau (2002) introduced RCT to better explain prejudice against women leaders. They sought to build on the glass-ceiling description that had been widely used for years and to more specifically examine the types of prejudice that women endure. The theory proposes that bias occurs due to an incongruity between stereotypes about a particular social group and the criteria for success in a specific role (del Carmen Triana et al., 2024). Society expects different things from women and men while also holding specific preferences for leaders.

Feminist standpoint theory has roots in Marxism, proposing that individuals in different groups "have access to information that those in more socially/politically privileged positions do not" (Crasnow, 2014, p. 146). Asking questions of those in marginalized groups provides a richer understanding of discrimination that can only be gained from firsthand knowledge. FST

encourages interrogating the role of organizational and societal structure and considering the role of patriarchy in normalizing the subordination of women (Wood, 2005). Together RCT and FST support the criticality of hearing firsthand from women about their lives and careers, while considering the structures and practices that create obstacles, enforce unfair expectations, and place significant limits on their leadership.

In addition to the larger social system in which the denomination operates, relevant historical and theological factors shape the culture and practice of the ECC. In what follows, I first consider how RCT and FST, respectively, inform understanding of the SGL within the ECC. Next, I review the policy and practice history of women's ordination in the denomination.

Theoretical Framework and the Stained-glass Labyrinth

RCT: Perception, Prejudice, and Theory Origins

Research shows that women leaders are evaluated differently, face double binds, and are held to different standards (Chikwe et al., 2024; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Whisenant et al., 2014). RCT explains why this discrimination exists and the SGL demonstrates these dynamics at work. The following review explains both phenomena and illustrates their relationship.

RCT developed out of social role theory, which proposes that a combination of biology and psychology lead to beliefs about women's and men's roles (Eagly & Wood, 2012). Physical sex differences mean that women and men are more suited to specific behaviors (Eagly & Wood, 2012). Male bodies tend to be bigger with more upper body strength, while women's bodies are uniquely designed for childbirth and nursing. Since tasks are seen to be more easily completed by one sex or the other, behavior leads to gender role beliefs as people relate these tasks to "corresponding dispositions" that are distinct for men and women (Eagly & Wood, 2012, p. 459). One example is the belief that women are naturally more nurturing due to their ability to

give birth. These generalized physical qualities shape gender stereotypes. A combination of socialization, biology, and psychology shape role performance as it is influenced by stereotypes (Eagly & Wood, 2012). Thus, social role theory speaks to how expectations and stereotypes shape what differences and similarities between men and women people tend to see.

Social role theory developed from “a variety of theoretical perspectives and empirical traditions: sociological role theory; research on gender stereotypes; ideas about correspondent inference, behavioral confirmation, and status construction; studies of gender identity and self-regulatory processes; and the methodological innovation of meta-analysis” (Eagly & Wood, 2012, p. 463). These disparate and wide-ranging analyses gradually shaped RCT into what it is today, and it has proved to be a helpful tool for considering the impact of gender beliefs and the evolution of stereotypes.

Role congruity theory brings together two types of investigation, including the focus on stereotyping and prejudice within social psychology as well as organizational psychology’s concentration on perceptions of managers (Eagly & Karau, 2002). These two areas come together in RCT as it draws our attention to the role that perception plays in discrimination of women in leadership (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Prejudice can occur when a person sees a mismatch between their belief in a stereotype and their expectations for a leadership role. For example, a woman can be seen as incapable of being a CEO because she does not exhibit the traditionally male characteristics expected for a leader of an organization. If seen as more nurturing and kinder, then some could assume that she would not have the ability to enforce policies that are needed to lead a corporation. The inclusion of perception is an important aspect since meaning is constructed as individuals interact with one another in the world (Bhattacharya, 2017). Expectations of others that are based on gender, race, age, or other distinctions shape

opportunities they may or may not receive. A person's perception of a woman could make them draw conclusions about her inability to lead, even before observing anything from the woman herself. Stereotypes held can limit opportunities based solely on gender.

The probability of women serving in leadership roles is influenced by gender expectations and stereotypes (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Ritter & Yoder, 2004). RCT predicts that leadership opportunities are limited for women, and that when women do lead, they will be judged more harshly than men serving in the same capacity (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Ritter & Yoder, 2004). Looking at two types of discrimination that are tied to gender, RCT considers both communal and agentic categories of gender expectations (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Ritter & Yoder, 2004). Agentic traits, such as assertiveness and self-sufficiency, have been considered more masculine as opposed to the communal qualities of kindness, gentleness, and support are seen as feminine (Eagly & Karau 2002).

This focus on perception is key to examining the barriers that women face. Traditionally, research has shown that many prefer a more agentic than communal type of leader (Danberry, 2017; Eagly & Wood, 2012; Massengale, 2009). Leader stereotypes are becoming more mixed and “androgynous by incorporating more culturally feminine communal qualities to accompany the culturally masculine agentic qualities traditionally preferred in leaders” (Eagly & Karau, 2024, p. 312). However, women continue to face unrealistic expectations and unfair stereotypes in the subtle and blatant discrimination that limits their leadership opportunities (Chikwe et al., 2024). Though leadership expectations have evolved, many restrictions still exist based on inaccurate perceptions of women and long-held expectations for leaders.

RCT has been used to analyze the experiences of women in various fields, such as sports leadership and coaching, management, and religion (Danberry, 2017; del Carmen Triana et al.,

2024; Massengale, 2009; Whisenant et al., 2014). Benstead et al. (2015) found that voters' opinions of candidates were shaped by the degree that their perceptions of specific groups matched their expectations for leadership. In other words, the more congruency between their view of what makes a good leader and what they think a certain group brings, the better their attitudes were toward the leader (Benstead et al., 2015). These perceptions were built on past experiences, both individually and at a societal level, indicating that they wanted leaders who conformed to previous observations of leadership (Benstead et al., 2015). A proven lens for considering the challenges that women leaders face, RCT is well-suited to investigating the experiences of women clergy. Perception plays a significant role in how women are viewed in religious settings. With many Christian churches professing (or inadvertently applying) patriarchal thinking and a complementarian approach to leadership, congregants have expectations for who makes the best leaders.

In denominations in which women can be ordained⁴, it could be assumed that all obstacles to top leadership have been removed. But if leadership expectations are shaped by past models, as suggested by Benstead et al.'s (2015) results, women pastors will continue to be rejected in practice despite accepting policy. And indeed, women continue to encounter the “stained-glass ceiling” as they pursue their careers (Danberry, 2017, p. 16; Sullins, 2000; Walker, 2019). Like the glass ceiling, barriers exist that hinder women's advancement and the complicated layers of obstacles that women face should be seen as a labyrinth (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Lauve-Moon (2021) suggests the framework of the “stained-glass labyrinth” (SGL) when

⁴ Some churches ordain women but still limit them to roles such as deacon or elder. For this paper, the word ordained will refer to women with “full clergy rights” in denominations where “there is no official position that women are formally barred from” (Chaves, 1997, p. 2).

investigating the challenges that women face in religious settings (p. 46). The metaphor more accurately depicts the conflicting forces at work that inhibit women throughout their careers, rather than a singular barrier of a ceiling. These obstacles occur at various levels and in many ways as a woman joins and attempts to move through an organization. Rather than one single block from the highest levels of leadership, women are consistently managing challenges, including gender bias in the hiring process, a shortage of role models, and a “devaluation of feminized jobs” (Lauve-Moon, 2021, p. 192).

The Stained-glass Labyrinth and RCT: Gender Expectations in Christianity

Gender stereotypes emerge based on the perception of individuals, shaped by family, society and direct and indirect observation of people in their social roles (Eagly & Wood, 2012; Eagly et al., 2019). Christianity has over 2000 years of history from which to draw for those who identify as followers of Jesus today. In some denominations, their interpretation of past historical events is their defense for exclusion and discrimination. While in other churches, history is marshaled to support gender equality and equity in all spaces. This historical influence is easily seen when looking at opportunities for women and leadership.

The role of women in churches has varied since the beginning of Christianity (Barr, 2021; Mosier-Peterson, 2016). Early Christian history reflects a more egalitarian design than many churches today and “the reality is that biblical women contradict modern ideas of biblical womanhood” (Barr, 2021, p. 67). Yet many Protestant churches hold to complementarianism and are unashamedly patriarchal (Barr, 2021). As is often the case, history can be interpreted in more than one way and those in power often conveniently see what they want to see.

The conservative Southern Seminary has broadened the use of what Weaver-Swartz terms “the gospel story” to support and defend their complementarian view of women and men

(2023, p. 19). Complementarianism specifies roles for women and men and dictates how everyone should move through the world (Bowler, 2019). It is often described as a view that holds both genders equally, yet men are in roles with the most power while women are expected to see their supportive roles as the only way for them to serve, work, and live in relationship with others.

The word “gospel” is most commonly used to describe the “ministry, death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ – or to the four New Testament books that outline this biography,” however, Southern has expanded what they refer to as the gospel, including complementarianism as a “gospel belief” (Weaver-Swartz, 2023, p. 19). This gospel label on beliefs implies that they are endorsed by God and, therefore, beyond debate (Weaver-Swartz, 2023). Including the complementarian framework as part of the gospel story is their strongest tool in defending patriarchy and enforcing restrictions on women leaders. Southern uses the gospel label to support their interpretation of what the Bible teaches on how women and men should relate to one another in many varied situations (Weaver-Swartz, 2023). This stamp of approval is a “discursive tool that delineates holy from unholy and legitimate from illegitimate” (Weaver-Swartz, 2023, p. 19). History, in this view, proclaims that women are to submit and let men fulfill their role as leaders. Thus, complementarianism and patriarchy are terms that many of these churches proudly embrace, proclaiming that this is the way of Jesus and other views are dishonoring to God.

On the other side of this argument, a few denominations see Jesus’s life and ministry as a model of inclusivity and bold support of women. They ordain women because they believe that a true commitment to Jesus means that Christians should value all people equally and have no hierarchy based on gender. They commit to the inclusion of women at all levels of leadership.

Yet even in these more inclusive denominations senior leadership opportunities for women are rare as role congruity theory predicts (Danberry, 2017; Eagly & Karau, 2002). Opportunities are limited through direct subjugation at times, yet these restrictions are often due to underlying values at work that reduce the chance for women to advance. Expectations on gender roles are “defined through culture and reinforced throughout non-work arenas” (Rhee & Sigler, 2015, p. 114). The stained-glass ceiling holds many women back through organizational practices as well as biased cultural expectations of women ingrained in Christian culture (Danberry, 2017; Sullins, 2000; Walker, 2019). Conceptually, the stained-glass labyrinth expands our understanding and helps us see that there are many levels of confusion and complication for women. Their commitment to lead amid the obstacles should be applauded, and it is critical that we continue to appreciate its difficulty.

Whether a denomination encourages or prohibits women from leadership, they all do so with an acknowledgement of what has come before. Both sides acknowledge the past and, therefore, it is crucial to consider this long history when investigating women and leadership in Christian contexts. Past and current U.S. culture, as well as Christian culture, continue to dictate the proper roles and behavior for women and men in churches. As discussed, the complementarian “equal but different” perspective allows some to proclaim an allegiance to equality yet still exclude women from the highest leadership positions (Chaves, 1997). In denominations that claim no commitment to such a perspective and profess equality, a closer examination reveals that patriarchy is still alive and well (Weaver-Swartz, 2023). Women and leadership in complementarian churches provide many critical and productive opportunities for change-oriented, community-based scholarship, but they are beyond the scope of this project. As

a space of proclaimed equality, the ECC is the focus of this study as a denomination that ordains women and places no formal policy restrictions on their advancement.

Subtle Yet Powerful Discrimination

Role congruity theory provides a helpful lens for investigating women and leadership in a variety of fields. No matter their leadership style and how they display agentic or communal traits, women face the challenge of meeting an impossible standard. Men are seen as more effective than women when leadership styles are similar, and women are expected to display traits that align with their gender but also show strength as a leader (Rhee & Sigler, 2015). In a male-dominated field such as sports, women experience a variety of discrimination both obvious and subtle. Researchers discovered that women coaches experience three types of stereotypical double binds: extreme evaluations (too mean or too soft), lower rewards with higher standards (high competence threshold), and usually viewed as “competent but disliked” (Gosai et al., 2023, p. 3). Like many other career fields, gendered expectations and discrimination limit opportunities for women in sports coaching in the U.K. and in the U.S, at both the collegiate and professional levels (Gosai et al., 2023; Karlik & Wolden, 2023; Norman et al., 2018).

Role congruity theory reflects a critical view of leadership that brings understanding to leadership and gender in Christian settings. Research provides evidence that similar double binds, gendered expectations, and underlying patriarchy limits opportunities for women clergy in comparable ways. In a comprehensive mixed-methods study of the CBF, a denomination that ordains women, Lauve-Moon (2021) discovered that congregants and leaders “were well intentioned in relation to issues of sexism and gender inequality” (p. ix). The purpose of her work is to investigate why gender equality is not seen at the highest levels of leadership in the CBF and to consider what people are doing that allows for sexism to continue. Similar questions

need to be asked in all denominations that ordain women. As scholars have discovered, it is a combination of obvious practices and subtle expectations that are placing limits on Christian women leaders (Danberry, 2017; Lauve-Moon, 2021; Schleifer & Miller, 2017; Waite, 2022; Weaver-Swartz, 2023). If lasting change is expected, the unconscious yet damaging beliefs must be revealed and addressed. Toward this end, FST helps us understand the underlying structures, norms, and convictions that shape the pastoral leadership experience of women in the ECC.

Feminist Standpoint Theory

Feminist standpoint theory's Marxist roots point to the value of information from those in less privileged positions (Crasnow, 2014). Marx proposed that asking questions of the workers, rather than relying on the interpretation of elites, is demanded for true understanding of the reality of the class system (Villanova University, 2016). Feminist scholars embraced this idea and advocated for the importance of seeking information from oppressed groups. Having a feminist standpoint results from not only hearing about a person's experiences but also taking a critical look at the ways that power influences their social location and limits what they can do (Villanova University, 2016; Wood, 2005). It requires hearing from those who have been ignored and examining the social structures that have limited their voice.

The women's movements of the 1960s and 1970s facilitated the advancement of feminist standpoint theory when attention was given to the imbalance of research approaches in representing all groups equally (Harding, 2009; Villanova University, 2016). Feminist research initially emerged as scholars acknowledged that women had been left out of the research process, both in the ability to carry out such work and in the lack of concepts that captured women's experiences (Crasnow, 2014). As research evolved to correct these flaws, feminists determined

that “existing paradigms systematically ignore or erase the significance of women’s experiences and the organization of gender” (Crasnow, 2014, p. 147).

Early scholars in this approach include Patricia Hill Collins, Donna Haraway, Sandra Harding, Nancy Hartsock, Hilary Rose, and Dorothy Smith (Wood, 2005). The theory proposes that a standpoint is deeper than an individual perspective, coming only from social status and life experience. Instead, it suggests that understanding the collective perspective among marginalized groups reveals systematic discrimination (Binte Mohiuddin, 2025). This connection to the larger group they inhabit allows for implications to be drawn beyond individuals (Crasnow, 2014; Villanova University, 2016). Taking on a feminist standpoint requires a recognition that larger social and political dynamics are in place that are oppressing certain groups (Wood, 2005). Therefore, the theory speaks to how patriarchy creates a hierarchical structure in which women’s subordination to men is the norm (Wood, 2005).

Recently FST has formed the basis for a conceptual framework for teaching computer science, illustrating how it can be implemented for research focused on practical change (Ocak et al., 2024). The pursuit of practical change aligns with community-engaged scholarship as researchers partner with participants to improve opportunities. Intersectional feminist standpoint theory provided a methodology for shaping research design and understanding findings in a study about how various social factors impact people’s experience of wildfires (Elliott, et al., 2023). It was used to analyze comments of female information technology (IT) employees as they discussed challenges with the workplace, including worker turnover (Allen, et al., 2006). Focusing on the unique perspective of individuals who inhabit specific groups gives voice to their stories while shedding light on the challenges they face collectively. It is important to look at the totality of their experiences to see the underlying structures that are creating obstacles. A

group's experiences result from sharing "common placement in hierarchical power relations" (Collins, 1997, p. 377). Yet without intentional investigation, the consequential impact of power structures can be overlooked.

FST concentrates on the power dynamics produced by cultural, social, and political factors (Crasnow, 2014). It questions the value-free ideal of scientific research, arguing instead that all research is shaped by values. Thus, rather than trying to avoid a value-based design, investigation should be prosocial, advancing "anti-racism, anti-sexism, and other egalitarian values" (Rolin, 2026, p. 34). Within FST, the social locations of participants and researcher are relevant, contrary to the traditional commitment to objectivity in science (Crasnow, 2014). Harding argues that this objectivity is a false claim of scientific research and the questions of marginalized groups are not the focus for much research (Villanova University, 2016). Bias is present from research sponsors, government organizations, pharmaceutical companies and others who have a vested interest in the outcome of a study (Villanova University, 2016).

True objectivity does not exist, and the loudest voices are those with the most power, shaping the questions asked and the research completed. As Harding explains, "standpoint theory says that who gets to decide what counts as a scientific question is a very important part of the research process, and we social justice movement people want different questions asked" (Villanova University, 2016, 12:02). FST helps change the research lens, taking into consideration the views of those outside positions of power, centering of voices typically ignored.

The exclusion of women goes deeper than the surface decisions of who could conduct research and who could be subjects. Early feminists began to reexamine how concepts were defined and understood (Crasnow, 2014). One example of the impact of this approach is the

concept of sexual harassment. Only when the experiences of many women in varied settings were grouped together could harassment move from being simply a few uncomfortable and isolated encounters experienced by a small number of women to something stemming from the social location of gender in the workplace and thus a valid topic for research (Crasnow, 2014).

Controversial in its approach and use, FST is critiqued as outdated, misguided, and as supporting the flawed social classification system that it aims to work against (Hekman, 1997; Huber, 2023; Villanova University, 2016). Yet it has withstood years of criticism and is still a viable framework for considering the unique view of women. Scholars continue to use FST in varied fields such as environmental education research, climate justice, and entrepreneurial leadership, as well as unique situations such as analyzing the experiences of Ukrainian refugee women living with Canadian hosts (Al-Hamad, et al., 2026; Cannon, 2025; Gough 2025; Patterson & Mavin, 2025). Researchers employ FST to help understand the perspectives of groups having a collective experience, amid the societal and cultural forces and broader dynamics that are at work against them. Controversy should be expected, due to its interrogation of power structures, and the persistence of FST as a powerful research tool illustrates its value (Villanova, 2016).

Considering the collective experience of women provides insight into the larger forces at work, including organizational culture, unconscious bias, and unofficial norms. In the context of an organization such as the ECC, FST allows for the shared experience of women in pastoral leadership to be more fully understood. These are not the experiences of just one or two women in unique locations, but there is a shared experience due to underlying discrimination, gender bias, and unfair expectations. It is vital to consider the true leadership experience for women, as opposed to accepting the edict “women lead here” as completely accurate.

ECC History

The ECC is a mainstream Protestant church founded in 1885 that prides itself on being “one of the most ethnically diverse denominations in North America” (The Evangelical Covenant Church, *Welcome to the covenant*, n.d.). This same inclusivity is touted in documents, leadership communication, and policies to affirm that women have equal opportunity to serve and lead in all ECC churches. In 1976, the ECC “passed a recommendation favoring the ordination of women” in a more formal step in affirming its inclusive view (Mann, 2004, p. 3). This was a significant point in the history of the church, often evidenced as a sign of their commitment to women.

A second vote held in 1976 immediately following the approval of women’s ordination was put forward to educate and equip churches for this change. This motion failed. The contrast between the first and second motion well captures the conflict that still exists between policy and practice within the ECC (The Evangelical Covenant Church, *Midwinter Tuesday afternoon breakout*, 2026). As Dr. Hana Andre, dean of faculty and associate professor at North Park Theological Seminary explains, “the Covenant would spend decades making up for this failed motion at a high cost to our pioneers” (The Evangelical Covenant Church, *Midwinter Tuesday afternoon breakout*, 2026, 20:14). Opposition to women in leadership has surfaced in various ways, including a motion in 2003 at their annual meeting (Chambers Johnson, 2020). This resolution proposed that refusing to place women in leadership should not be a means to exclude any church or individual from ministerial leadership. That motion was defeated, and the ECC has continued to affirm their commitment to women amid resistance from formal channels (Chambers Johnson, 2020).

In 1988, Reverend Mary Miller administered a survey and learned that the initial decade of women's ordination resulted in significant pain and anger in the first generation of 23 women, many of whom did not find a place to serve in the ECC (The Evangelical Covenant Church, *Midwinter Tuesday afternoon breakout*, 2026). From 1977-1987, only 6.9% of ordained pastors in the ECC were women, growing to 15.2% by 1997 and to 27.8% by 2016 (Johnson, 2017).

Though total numbers have improved, statistics do not tell the entire story. Since Miller's study in 1988, a decennial study has offered a mix of results on what women experience, indicating progress yet always pointing to continued barriers (Johnson, 2017). Covenant women have taken it on themselves to conduct these studies, with the most recent one completed by Rev. Dr. Michelle S. Dodson from North Park Theological Seminary. At the 10-year anniversary of the ECC's decision to ordain women, the survey of the first group of women who earned MDiv degrees from North Park, was referenced above and conducted by Rev. Mary Miller. Of the twenty-five women who completed the survey, most did not believe the ECC was supportive of women in ministry (Johnson, 2017). At the 20-year mark, women shared about the lack of opportunities, support, and advocacy and specifically regional superintendents were named as some of the least supportive. Rev. Dr. Isolde Anderson's survey in 1997 was completed by 63% (38 of 60) of women who had earned MDiv degrees from North Park, and results indicated a difference between the ECC's stated support of women and its practice. However, this installation of the survey showed fewer women leaving the ECC and more finding positions after their initial roles (Johnson, 2017).

Expanding the survey to those not educated at North Park but still credentialed in the ECC, Amanda Olson and Mae Cannon contacted 363 women and 134 completed the survey in 2007. Improvements were seen again with the general view of the ECC's relationship to women

in ministry, but challenges were still reported at the regional level (Dodson, 2026; Johnson, 2017). In 2016, in the most comprehensive study up to that point, continued barriers were found at senior level positions along with a lack of support at the regional level, while “perceptions of denominational support continue to improve,” confirming “ongoing but uneven progress” (Dodson, 2026, p. 91). A significant evolution existed with this study as intersectionality was included and more recognition was given to the differences for women of color (Dodson, 2026; Johnson, 2017).

ECC leadership has responded to these surveys with some efforts toward change, including various resolutions or task forces. As a result of the 1996 study revealing the growing discontent and minimal progress, the ACCW was formed in 1998. In 2000, then Covenant President Glenn Palenberg issued a call for the entire denomination to consider the problem. Obstacles were identified and another organization, the Commission on Biblical Gender Equality was created. At this point, resources were created to bring structural and organizational change (The Evangelical Covenant Church, *Midwinter Tuesday afternoon breakout*, 2026). In 2004, various resources on gender equality were created and disseminated to all pastors and churches, making the first time in 28 years that educational resources were developed and distributed (Chambers Johnson, 2020).

The 2009 study revealed that these efforts had a positive impact, yet in the most recent study, completed in 2025, women continue to indicate a lack of support in the call process (The Evangelical Covenant Church, *Midwinter Tuesday afternoon breakout*, 2026). Rev. Dr. Dodson, an ECC pastor, professor, and sociologist of religion, conducted the 2025 study that had 129 survey respondents, with most completing the full survey (Dodson, 2026). About 41% had attended North Park Theological Seminary, 77% were serving in paid ministerial contexts and

73% were serving in Covenant affiliated settings. Sixty-two percent of women currently serving in pastoral leadership roles found positions through prior connections to their church and/or by already serving in a leadership role there before they attended seminary (The Evangelical Covenant Church, *Midwinter Tuesday afternoon breakout*, 2026). The biggest hurdle still to overcome is to ability to receive a first call or subsequent positions that would move women out of their initial context for ministry.

The general call process does not rely on previous interpersonal connection but is a typical job search and hiring procedure that one might find in any organization. Thus, while some women are experiencing confirmation in their role and support from local churches and national leadership, many other congregations refuse to even consider women in pastoral leadership, resulting in a shortage of call options for women coming directly out of seminary or looking to move up after their initial position. Dodson (2026) noted that the support that women feel from regional leadership after their first call drops with each subsequent call, and that most women feel “somewhat or very supported, but a notable minority feel unsupported” from the denomination overall (p. 95). Her study revealed that there is inconsistency between the ECC’s commitment to women in ministry and their choice to allow individual churches to refuse to consider women for pastoral roles.

The Pivotal Role of Organizational Culture

The initiative Four More Women in the Pulpit had significant impact in the ECC in 2018-2019. In 2018, Rev. Dr. Devyn Chambers Johnson (2020) created a video to encourage her male colleagues to “talk less and listen more” (p. 2). She prompted them into a specific challenge, encouraging all pastors to invite four more women to speak from their pulpit over the course of the next year and to be present in the congregation when those women preached. Though not

intending to create a denomination-wide initiative, she saw enthusiastic support and interest and promptly created a website, established a social media presence, and began to promote the initiative where she could. Four More grew in its scope but remained an unofficial challenge. In response to this movement, Chambers Johnson (2020) designed a study to investigate the next steps for the ECC in 2019, using action research and a focus group of women to address the question, “how can the culture of the ECC match the egalitarian values to which we aspire?” (p. 12). Though Four More saw some success, she and others could see the challenges that remain at the local level.

Chambers Johnson (2020) accurately discusses this challenge of the ECC as an adaptive one, rather than a technical challenge. Adaptive changes address the values of an organization more than policy or behavior; thus, they require deeper questions to be asked.

Since adaptive challenges are so deeply connected to our values we should consider reframing the question at hand. Rather than questions like: how can we get more women in lead pastor roles? Perhaps the better question is: what ECC values are keeping women out of the pulpit? (Chambers Johnson, 2020, p. 64)

Her study kept participants focused on adaptive solutions and points our focus to organizational culture and underlying gender bias. Chambers Johnson (2020) provides a framework to guide organizations to work against discrimination and toward a place of equality for everyone. This Continuum of Justice Engagement has four stages, including tolerate, ally, advocate, and make room, providing a tangible way for the ECC to face reality and align policy with practice (Chambers Johnson, 2020).

With personal experience and insight from serving within the ECC, Chambers Johnson’s (2020) framework indicates the level of justice engagement of the ECC over time and gives

direction for change. Toleration characterized the ECC when the initial vote for women's ordination passed in 1976. The rejection of the second motion to educate and equip churches immediately following illustrates the shallowness of the denomination's commitment to this change (Chambers Johnson, 2020). Views varied and though there was enough support to pass, many only agreed to it if it did not change things in their church (Chambers Johnson, 2020).

Allies support individuals but do not move toward changes on a larger scale, while advocates take steps toward inclusion and shine a light on injustice. Allies and advocates play important roles in supporting individuals and pushing organizations to take an honest look at their flaws and grow, yet true change requires the final stage of making room. This stage requires something from those in power and may mean stepping out of a role or space to allow the marginalized in.

You make sure that there are never rooms, or tables, or meetings where no women are present. You make sure there are never rooms, or tables, or meetings where there is only a token woman present. And you make sure of this by giving up your own seat if necessary. Making room, the move beyond advocacy, is a surrendering and sharing of power. (Chambers Johnson, 2020, p. 81)

A key event in recent ECC history shows the depth of gender bias in the ECC. In January 2019, then ECC President John Wenrich announced a new position would soon be filled that would "promote the advancement of female clergy" (Chambers Johnson, 2020, p. 24). Though initially read as sign of hope, when the job description was shared in March, it disappointed many women, including Chambers Johnson and her focus group. Called "Director of Women's Initiatives," the role would entail all tasks typically done by the Director of Women's Ministries as well as "promoting clergywomen in the denomination" (Chambers Johnson, 2020, p. 25).

Women recognized that this would be an impossible portfolio of responsibilities, with any advocacy work neglected, even if the person in the role had the best of intentions. Lumping this focus on clergywomen into a job that was already big enough by itself was disappointing for them. As they learned that groups that should have been consulted, including the ACCW, were not included in the formation of this position, frustration grew.

Currently engaged in her action research project as these events unfolded, Chambers Johnson and her participants spearheaded a movement of clergywomen and men to write letters to key leaders to voice their concerns. As a response, the ECC released a FAQ document to defend their choices on this position and to correct the interpretations of those who had expressed disappointment. As Chambers Johnson (2020) writes, the FAQ's dismissal of the concerns as "misunderstandings" diminished the critiques and "implied they were invalid," which affirmed the sense that they were being ignored and unheard (p. 26). After many people then pursued action with the Executive Board, a conference call was held with those who wrote the job description and a few key women serving in leadership roles. The only change that occurred after this call was that the job would no longer involve any reference or attention given to clergywomen. While this change more accurately reflects what the role would be, the once hopeful moment of movement toward change turned out to be yet another disappointment and missed opportunity by ECC leaders. Chambers Johnson (2020) summarizes the implications thusly:

while the original promise of a position to promote clergywomen had given us a sense of hope, the events that unfolded reminded us how deeply imbedded sexism and patriarchy are in our beloved denomination. What we had hoped would be a breakthrough became

just another chapter in the tedious and exhausting journey of advocating for ourselves in a system that was not created for us or by us. (p. 28)

Rationale for Study

ECC policies are in place and there has been progress since the ordination of women began in 1976. Surveys and research completed by ECC women in pastoral leadership have provided summaries of the experiences of women and some specific insights into what women believe about ECC leadership. However, what is missing from the research record is an account, told in their own voices, of how clergywomen of the ECC have experienced the SGL. After 50 years, five surveys, and an action research project completed by a current ECC pastor, there is no question that resistance remains, equity is chimerical, and the causes of organizational intransigence are complex. Therefore, we must listen to clergywomen in ECC congregations to learn their experiences of the practice-policy gap and navigating the SGL. Failing to do so foregoes a vital source of insight, denies women pastors full participation in solving the problem, and perpetuates injustice given that these women have directly borne the cost of the gap.

Fifty years provides the perfect opportunity to make sure the 60-year survey reveals a new level of evolution. History and the present tell us that things will never be easy for any marginalized group. Women in pastoral leadership will continue to face doubts about their abilities and actions, accusations of heresy, and hurtful treatment from those inside and outside of their congregations. But it is time for the ECC to build a different experience for women who so faithfully serve amid the opposition and challenges. This study offers an ethically and epistemologically necessary way of understanding the problem — an understanding that only the direct experiences of women in ECC congregational leader can provide.

Conclusion

The ECC identifies as a denomination that embraces and celebrates women as leaders, supports them in their pursuit of occupational goals, and aims for diversity in gender within the organization. Women serve in leadership at all levels and national leadership proclaims a unified approach in this support. Yet women are limited in their advancement and face obstacles that impede their careers. This study investigated women's experiences and their impressions of the ECC amid denominational endorsement, seeking to understand their reality and obstacles faced.

RCT and FST give us a rich theoretical framework to move beyond the visible challenges and take an honest look at the barriers limiting women in pastoral leadership. It is crucial to ask women directly about their experiences, both to comprehend their reality and to better understand deeper dynamics in organizational culture and structure. These theories offer an appropriate framework to consider the blatant and subtle discrimination that shapes the leadership experience for women. The stained-glass labyrinth has been assembled through history, social expectations, patriarchy, and power structures that favor men. The oppression women face is a collective problem and if not given more attention, the deeply rooted patterns and bias will continue to restrict women despite verbal commendation and affirming policies.

The ECC's history shows glimpses of progress and slow growth, along with disappointment and hurt for women pursuing their careers. Fifty years of women's ordination is being celebrated by the ECC and can serve as a point of honest evaluation and reflection. As I demonstrate in the next chapter, this study provides a rigorous, theoretically informed analysis that gives voice to the day-to-day reality of the SGL in a way that only those who live it can offer. This is the reflection needed by the ECC and society at this moment.

Chapter 3 - Methodology and Methods

It is literally impossible to be a woman. You are so beautiful, and so smart, and it kills me that you don't think you're good enough. Like, we have to always be extraordinary, but somehow we're always doing it wrong. You have to be thin, but not too thin. And you can never say you want to be thin. You have to say you want to be healthy, but also you have to be thin. You have to have money, but you can't ask for money because that's crass. You have to be a boss, but you can't be mean. You have to lead, but you can't squash other people's ideas. You're supposed to love being a mother, but don't talk about your kids all the damn time. You have to be a career woman but also always be looking out for other people . . . You have to never get old, never be rude, never show off, never be selfish, never fall down, never fail, never show fear, never get out of line. It's too hard! It's too contradictory and nobody gives you a medal or says thank you! And it turns out in fact that not only are you doing everything wrong, but also everything is your fault.

(Gerwig, 2023)

This portion of the iconic America Ferrera monologue from the movie *Barbie* captures the impossible balance expected of women. Expectations force women into an unattainable pursuit of perfection. Within the ECC, gender expectations lead to direct and subtle discrimination that creates hurdles and obstructs women's path to leadership. The purpose of this study was to better understand the experiences of women in pastoral leadership in the ECC, seeking to comprehend their reality and the obstacles that they face within the SGL. Additionally, I investigated their perception of ECC leadership and the role that the ACCW serves in helping them to manage their challenges. In Chapter 2, I described how RCT and FST serve together as a viable framework to consider how individual stories reflect a collective

experience and how this provides insight into the stained-glass labyrinth. Given the larger historical contexts of Christianity and the ECC specifically, these frames give us an adequate lens to consider the broader political and social structures, the role of power and organizational culture, and they provide the reasoning to listen to ECC women pastors to learn what must change. Adopting an interpretive and critical methodology allowed me to understand interviewees experiences and consider how discrimination, unintentional bias, gendered expectations, and broader structures hinder women's leadership opportunities. This purpose and framing shaped this study and the following research goals.

Research Objectives

In this study, the ECC organization was the system for analysis. Key stakeholders connected to this issue include ECC women in pastoral leadership present and future; and ECC leadership at all levels, including volunteer leaders and paid staff and congregational members. Within this system, participants were all women in pastoral leadership within the ECC, past and/or present. The purpose of this research was to explore the experiences of women in pastoral leadership in the ECC to encourage more inclusion, equity, and opportunities for women to lead. Given the challenges that these pastors face, I investigated their experiences with a focus on obstacles they encounter and on resources they use to stay in their roles. Three research questions shaped the design and implementation:

RQ1: In what ways are women experiencing the stained-glass labyrinth (SGL) in the ECC?

RQ2: What are participants' perceptions of ECC leadership and their support of women?

RQ3: How does the ACCW affect the experience of the SGL for women?

The goal for these findings was to gain an understanding of the day-to-day experience of women in pastoral leadership to discern possible next steps for ECC leadership to improve leadership opportunities for women.

Methodology

To pursue these objectives, I employed a qualitative approach rooted in a critical interpretive methodology. My feminist orientation committed me to using my own lived experiences as part of my approach and to lift up the personal experiences of participants. My interest in the lived reality of women in Christian settings is rooted in my own experience as a woman working in a religious organization for many years. These years provide the framework for my understanding of this type of work in ministry leadership. In recent years, my growing awareness of inequities and systemic misogyny has fueled my passion to give other women the opportunity to use their voices and tell their stories. I have personally been discriminated against and been told that my hardships were an exception to the rule, or that my experiences were not valid because someone else has not seen or felt any opposition. I have encountered microaggressions, been treated as if I am a problem for asking questions, and have been silenced in the name of organizational “position, policy, and practice.” Similarly, I have watched other women endure comparable challenges in the same organization and in other Christian settings.

Thus, I bring a specific view into this research, and in keeping with a feminist ontology and epistemology, I drew on my situated knowledge and experiences. I know that misogyny exists and limits the advancement of women in leadership in Christian settings. I am aware of this reality as I also acknowledge that I do not know the story of every woman leader. I assume that every woman has had at least some experiences similar to my own. Therefore, I acknowledged this assumption when interviewing participants and allowed that they may have

different experiences and understandings. Likewise, I practiced self-reflexivity as I analyzed interview transcripts. Ultimately, I understand my personal experience of sexism to have enhanced my research and enriched the conversations I had with participants. Though not in a pastoral role, I was able to relate to what many women shared and my curiosity about their experiences was accompanied by empathy and understanding.

Qualitative research allows for the examination of a phenomenon as experienced by those who live it. It reveals deeper truths, working with members of a larger population to comprehend their reality. The purpose can be to deeply understand and provide knowledge about a group's experiences, or it could be to examine how social structures create inequality, and/or to deconstruct the frameworks that are harmful to oppressed groups (Bhattacharya, 2017; Denzin & Lincoln, 1996). This design allows for the emergence of information previously unknown, ignored, or dismissed, such as the personal stories of those who are often overlooked (Bhattacharya, 2017). An interpretive and critical methodology, with a feminist orientation to methods, provided a suitable framework for understanding and examining the experiences of women in pastoral leadership in the ECC.

An Interpretive and Critical Methodology

An interpretive and critical methodology allows for an understanding of the experiences of women clergy and an interrogation of the role that social and organizational structures play in the SGL. Interpretivism came about as a response to positivism, and it centers on understanding events, rather than discovering causality (Bhattacharya, 2017; Crotty, 1998). Positivism looks for objective truth and certainty through observation, proposing that progress comes through scientific advancement (Bhattacharya, 2017; Crotty, 1998, Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Post-positivists remain committed to this pursuit of truth but see it as less definitive and unchanging.

They add nuance to this understanding of the world and allow for uncertainty and a recognition that history, culture, and the researcher's values need to be considered (Bhattacharya, 2017).

This evolution of positivism to post-positivism began to pave the way for a different epistemology as some scholars shifted from the objectivism of these traditions to constructionism. Interpretivism complements this way of seeing knowledge and the world, proposing that we should look at how culture and history influence how social life is understood (Bhattacharya, 2017; Crotty, 1998). Focusing on comprehending experiences from the participant's view is important when investigating personal stories and the larger context of culture and history is necessary for understanding experiences within Christianity (Danberry, 2017). Christianity has almost 2000 years of history and tradition influences current policies and practices. Patriarchal culture shaped the early Christian church, just as it continues to today (Barr, 2021). Cultural and historical patterns and trends have a significant impact on women in pastoral leadership in the ECC.

Given this study's research focus on the stories of individual women within the larger cultural and historical setting, interpretivism provided a helpful structure to investigate their experiences. Moving beyond deepening our understanding, it is necessary to interrogate current religious systems that hinder women clergy. Bringing in a critical lens provided the chance to explore power dynamics and oppression in social structures (Bhattacharya, 2017; Crotty, 1998). This helps us question events when we believe that individuals are impacted negatively because of their identity (Bhattacharya, 2017). As noted, research points to the significant impact that history, culture, patriarchy, and conservative Christian views have had on the limitations for women leaders in the church (Barr, 2021; Ingersoll, 2003; Lauve-Moon, 2021; Weaver-Swartz, 2023). Organizational and cultural expectations and norms hinder women even in spaces where

equality is claimed (Lauve-Moon, 2021; Weaver-Swartz, 2023). The critical focus on systems, oppression, and the need to address underlying forces was beneficial.

With a critical interpretive methodology, I needed methods that would allow me to hear directly from participants and see the world from within the historical-cultural context of the ECC. A combination of interviews and contextual reading of documents allowed me this access. Previous research relied on these same methods since they facilitate hearing stories from individuals themselves, observing interactions and communication, and examining internal and external communication from church leadership. This approach served to shape the methods explained in depth in the following sections.

Methods

This critical interpretive qualitative interview study provided me a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of women and allowed me to interrogate how patriarchy and tradition are holding women back. Interviews with 38 women were conducted about their leadership experience and their perceptions of ECC leadership, the ACCW, and the ACCW's effectiveness. Contextual reading of ECC documents, organizational policies and statements, and communications about the ACCW informed my analyses. This approach laid the foundation for collaborative, community-engaged scholarship that supports women and advances change. Community-engaged research creates opportunities for partnership with participants, and this was a key focus for this study as I sought to give an accurate presentation of women's experiences, listening to them on what changes should be made. Thus, in addition to this scholarly communication, a summary of findings and implications will be provided to all interested participants. Connections made within the ACCW offer a specific way to engage with findings and provide feedback to the ECC and I plan to meet with members of the ACCW and

other interested participants to discuss next steps. The following sections describe the reasoning for and process of the use of interviews and a contextual reading of documents.

Reasoning for Interviews

Interviews were used frequently in previous research and often described as a key method to give women a chance to use their own voices and to bring clarity to the researcher's understanding of their daily lives and ministry (Murphy, 2017; Pauly, 2018; Waite, 2022; Weaver-Swartz, 2023; Webb, 2022). Qualitative interviews provide opportunities for personal interaction to clarify the experience of individuals, and it is empowering for women to use their voice and share their experiences of working in a field that is dominated by men (deMarrais, 2004; Mosier-Peterson, 2016).

I chose interviews as an effective primary method for this research for three reasons. First, FST highlights the need for hearing the stories of individuals in their own words (Bhattacharya, 2017). In this case, ECC women in pastoral leadership can speak to issues of discrimination and support in a unique way. Power dynamics play a key role in the SGL and interviews provide a way to examine how leadership and power shape the experience of participants. Interviews provide opportunities for personal interaction to clarify the experience of individuals (deMarrais, 2004).

Second, interviews allow researchers to relate to participants with an ethic of care more fully than is possible with a confidential survey. Participants' stories and experiences can be validated, and it can be a therapeutic experience to share challenges with someone who truly listens (deMarrais, 2004). When working with marginalized groups it is important to give them an opportunity to share their own stories, beliefs, feelings, and challenges. The perceptions of participants themselves matter and in this study, their experiences shaped all recommendations.

Interviews give space for women to “process their experiences – and even their insecurities” and it gave them a chance to use their voice and share their stories (Weaver-Swartz, 2023, p. 13).

Finally, there is limited information, printed or online, available about the ACCW. This necessitated interviews to learn what aspects of support organizations might merit more granular analysis. I used open-ended questions and it was an effective way to learn about the resources offered and how they have been utilized by women personally and by their congregations.

Participants

I conducted interviews via Zoom with 38 women in pastoral leadership in the ECC, following the principle of saturation. Using initial known contacts, I employed snowball sampling to connect with other women in pastoral roles. The age of participants ranged from late 20s to late 70s and included those who worked with the ECC in the initial years of women’s ordination in the 1970s and 1980s, along with current pastors. Some were more recent graduates of North Park Theological Seminary and either currently working with an ECC church or not choosing that career at this time for various reasons. All women have worked in some capacity for the ECC in a staff leadership position. Most of these roles were paid positions though some were not currently being paid mainly due to budget constraints.

Some were ordained within the ECC or elsewhere, others were licensed, and others were in neither category but served in a variety of leadership roles. Several participants came to the ECC from other denominations where they were ordained or served in other roles; others attended ECC churches from birth, went to North Park Theological Seminary, and work in ECC churches now. A small number have not served in a formal pastoral role, whether ordained or not, and their reasons for not holding or pursuing a pastoral career the ECC were complex. I intentionally sought to include diversity in the sample and some participants self-identified as

ethnicities other than white. Due to the small number of ethnicities in the ECC, direct identification of ethnicities is not included in this report to avoid the disclosure of specific participants.

Description of Questions

I built interview questions with the goal of understanding and exploration, with some focusing on gender and power to fit within a critical approach (deMarrais, 2004). My own ministry experiences helped me form questions that went beyond reporting of facts and asked participants to reflect on challenges. I primarily used a few specific questions with each participant; most queries were open-ended and offered the chance for participants to lead the direction of the conversation. Therefore, follow up questions and directions in conversations varied with each participant. I began with a broad question about their background and education, then asked about their involvement with the ECC (length of time, extent of involvement, reasons for initial connection). Later questions were focused on topics including, for example, discrimination, gender expectations, and experience in team meetings and with congregants. Follow up questions were used to clarify and deepen my understanding. (See appendices A and B for Recruitment and Interview Protocol).

Interview Details

The IRB approval process was completed in December of 2024, then renewed in December of 2025 as I continued to work with the data. An informed consent document was signed and returned for each participant prior to the interview. Interviews were conducted over Zoom with an average length of about 60 minutes. All were held between February and June of 2025. After initial greetings and introduction, I began with asking for permission to record the interview. I then explained the rationale for the study, my research questions, and a brief

description of the evolution of my research. I asked if there were any questions before continuing with my questions. This initial time lasted about 5-10 minutes, depending on any questions from them or initial clarification needed.

At times, I shared briefly from my personal ministry experience if it connected with what they shared, but I focused mainly on listening and asking clarifying questions about what they discussed. Each participant was gracious and open, often sharing difficult experiences while still communicating respect for the ECC and its leadership. I was struck by their positive feelings toward the denomination, even among the challenges. Though I could relate to this to a degree, this also stood out as I listened to stories of significant pain and hardship. My commitment to a feminist orientation shaped how I heard what was said, filtering it through own experiences and this sensitized me to certain words and phrases. When approaching the one-hour mark, I communicated that we were at the time limit that they had agreed to and explained that we could finish up. In a few circumstances, I asked for permission to ask another question or two if they still had more time to talk. Only one interview lasted over two hours. Though I offered at several points to stop, the participant expressed a desire to continue our conversation. She shared that no one had ever asked her about her story, and she believed that “ECC leaders don’t want to hear my story.” But apart from this instance, most interviews were 60 minutes with a small number lasting closer to 90. In summary, participants shared openly and honestly about the positive and negative experiences and provided a wealth of information. It was a privilege to have this time with each of them.

Data Collection

Zoom transcripts were collected and accessed after each interview. These files, along with the video recordings and informed consent documents were all stored in a secure online

Google drive that was only accessible to me. All files were saved within an individual folder for each participant, with two transcript files per participant. The initial transcript from Zoom was saved, then opened using Google documents, and saved again.

As interviews were completed, I kept observation notes in a Google document as well as hand-written thoughts in a notebook. These moments of reflection allowed me to think more deeply about what was said and determine if initial themes were recurring. As mentioned, my own experiences shaped my initial assumptions and prompted me to expect certain themes to emerge. Thus, I often noted my own thoughts and experiences that connected with the data, while also documenting ideas to return to later. On a few occasions, participants shared thoughts with me post-interview via text or email. These messages were copied and pasted into a Google document.

I personally emailed 45 women and in addition to the 38 who completed the interview, four more responded with either initial interest or expressed an inability to complete an interview at this time, leaving only three who never responded. I defined saturation as “the point during data analysis at which incoming data points (interviews) produce little or no new useful information to the study objectives” (Guest et al., 2020, p. 5). I began to see saturation as I approached interview number 30. I stopped contacting new potential participants at this time. However, previous communication resulted in a total of 38 interviews. Since part of my research purpose was to give the opportunity for women to share their stories in their own words, it was crucial to follow through with an interview for anyone willing to participate. Each person contributed something unique, even after I saw a recurrence of some themes.

The overwhelming positive response to my request for participation can be attributed partially to the willingness of these women to help, but it also indicates the underlying need felt

by those serving in pastoral roles. Though many positive stories were shared, every participant also had numerous difficulties that they have encountered. My time in data collection proved to be a rich experience for me and many participants expressed gratitude for my work and interest in my findings.

Data Analysis

I used inductive thematic analysis of interview transcripts and documents, which involves starting with the data since there was no testable hypothesis driving the study (Bhattacharya, 2017). Qualitative researchers thoroughly look through all data and then group content into small units called codes (Bhattacharya, 2017). I used concept coding, which is an appropriate method for critical studies since it prompts contemplation of social norms and patterns (Saldaña, 2025). The focus was on participant content since I was examining their perceptions. Through my interpretation and assessment, my coding was then “my contribution to the meaning-making enterprise” (Saldaña, 2025, p. 28). My ontological and epistemological choices committed me to value my own experiences alongside the richness of stories shared with me. Coding requires making decisions within the larger context of the findings (Elliott, 2018). Codes flow from the data, then can be grouped into larger categories, allowing the researcher to see patterns and themes that emerge (Bhattacharya, 2017).

To begin the coding process, I opened the transcript file and the Zoom recording. I listened to each interview to correct, edit, and clarify the transcripts as needed. Frequently pausing allowed me time to correct any errors, and I often re-listened multiple times to assure that I was accurately representing what was said. I corrected words and phrases in my portion of the interviews as needed for understanding, but mainly this work was centered on the content from participants. In this transcript clean up, I looked for initial themes related to the research

questions and made a preliminary list of possible codes, including “discrimination” and “lack of job opportunities.”

I then went back through each transcript and assigned first-level codes, using some concepts from my preliminary list and adding others. Compiling some quotes in the code book allowed me to confirm patterns, and I used color-coding in the Google document to help sections stand out. Examples of first-level codes included lack of job opportunities, positive view of ECC leadership, and gender-based expectations. These initial codes served as a starting point to recognize themes and look for connections between participants. In this stage, I looked for phrases and words that stood out and appeared repeatedly (Bhattachyra, 2017).

I read each transcript a second time, referencing the video recording as needed to better understand the content. In second level coding, broader labels were assigned as categories, such as impressions of ECC leadership and differences for women. As Saldaña (2025) explains, my coding process was more cyclical than linear. Concepts emerged from the data and specific labeling then became associated with broader categories. As I reviewed coded sections additional times, findings surfaced that revealed common experiences for the women. Concept coding allowed me to assign “meso or macro levels of meaning” to participants’ words as I examined for larger forces at work (Saldaña, 2025, p. 178). Finally, I read each transcript a third time and continued to reflect on the content and underlying messages. In addition, I took written notes during each interview and often went back to those to confirm details at various stages. These initial notes shaped my first attempts at codes and provided a written record of my impressions during the interviews. Spending this amount of time in data analysis allowed me a depth of understanding of broader themes and differences between participants. (See appendices C and D for Data Analysis Code Book and Transcript Coding Sample).

Interviews allowed me to hear from the women about their views of ECC leadership and thoughts on the ACCW. In a study involving ethnic minorities, scholars found that internal communication is a key factor for employees and has an impact on their connection to the company, as well as to their personal experience working for the organization (Lee et al., 2021). There are clear links between “leadership and internal communication in achieving organizational justice” (Lee et al., 2021, p. 327). Combining this information with my contextual reading of external communication provided additional insights. It was important for me to analyze the communication of ECC leadership, through both perceptions of participants and my direct examination of documents, websites, and other means of communication.

I analyzed websites and other ECC resources to discern the substance of what the ECC professes regarding women in leadership. Some of this content was mentioned by participants and many openly shared their interpretations of ECC messages. Gathering information about organizational messages helped to clarify the statements, claims, and policies of the ECC.

All documents and content reviewed were from ECC websites and available to the public. Their general website was my starting point, The Evangelical Covenant Church at <https://covchurch.org/>. I then looked through several specific pages for more detail. Websites analyzed included: “Who We Are” and its sub-pages for details on history, beliefs and policies, leadership, and general denominational information. Another key page was “Resources,” with a sub-page of “Women in Ministry” that could be found through the drop-down menu labeled “Topic.” The Women in Ministry site offered several different resources available to download, such as *Called and Gifted, A Biblical and Theological Basis for Women in Ministry*, and *All God’s People*. I also examined information on the ACCW website at

<https://www.covclergywomen.org/>. Most sites were accessed multiple times between February 2025 and through the process of this writing in 2026.

Review of documents, websites, and resources was a fluid process that began with an initial reading of content with attention paid to word and image use. Concept coding focuses on the broader ideas that are “beyond the tangible and apparent” (Saldaña, 2025, p. 177). In my initial analysis, I noted the volume of resources available on the topic of women in ministry as well as the frequent images on websites of women teaching, speaking, or performing other pastoral and leadership behaviors. As has been noted, ECC communication about the denomination’s identity clearly portrays that women lead and have no restrictions.

Since my RQs and objectives were focused on the participants’ perception of ECC leadership and the ACCW, my investigation of documents and resources was secondary to my analysis of transcripts. I noted initial observations as I looked over resources, also considering underlying messages that were being communicated. For example, in the downloadable resource *Called & Gifted*, Mann (2004) writes about possible disagreement among churches with women leading,

we understand that there may be a dissenting voice, and we can respect the fact that others have seriously and honestly wrestled with this question and come to a different conclusion. But this is not the position that the denomination holds, and we hope that all Covenant churches will welcome women in leadership roles. (emphasis mine, p. 18)

The surface level message conveys that the ECC recognizes a range of views, but their commitment to women is assured. Yet the use of the word “hope” communicates a lack of commitment to hold churches accountable to supporting women. Concept coding helped me see beyond the words that were said or written and to consider manifest content.

Contextual reading of documents provided an important additional tool for discerning messages and expectations (both stated and unstated) around gender and leadership (Ingersoll, 2003; Lauve-Moon, 2021; Murphy, 2017; Pauly, 2018; Weaver-Swartz, 2023). I used this method to determine what formal organizational messages are provided by ECC leadership, while also using interview questions to ask for detailed feedback on what messages participants hear from leadership, peers, and congregants. These messages come through ECC policies and resources, the ECC seminary North Park Theological Seminary, and communication from leadership through public statements and interpersonal connections. Interviews and my own observations of ECC communication provided a way to address all RQs, asking personally for the experiences of women and for their thoughts on ECC leadership and the ACCW. Focusing on documents allowed for the direct observation of ECC messaging to their pastors, staff, congregants, and the public. Approaching the understanding of messaging from these two sides gave a well-rounded picture of what is being said and what participants are hearing.

Conclusion

An interpretive and critical methodology with qualitative interviews provided a depth of findings that were rich and insightful. As intended, I learned about the experiences of women in pastoral leadership, their impressions of ECC leadership, and their views on the work of the ACCW. This study was the first step to investigate the lived reality for women in pastoral leadership in the ECC. A desire to continue with this work stems from a commitment to community-engaged research. An approach focused on understanding and interrogating helped make this study one of impact for the ECC. In the following chapter I describe the findings and provide a picture of how women experience the SGL in the ECC and insights into how this data points to larger dynamics at work in organizational culture.

Chapter 4 - Findings

I kid you not, I sat down with one of our conference leaders to say like, I think I'm going to throw in for this (pastoral role), and he patted my hand. He patted my hand, and he goes, N, I'm just going to stop you. And he said, I'm working with the church chair on their search, and they've made it clear they will not accept a resume from a female.

(Pastor N)

Several participants talked about this reality that women clergy face within the ECC. ECC leadership recognizes that some churches within the denomination will not except a woman's resume for open positions. One participant recalled a pastoral job posting that used only male pronouns and to her knowledge, this was not addressed by the regional superintendent even when brought to their attention. Churches are allowed to operate with open bias against women in leadership, within a denomination where the organization's position and policy affirm women's leadership. ECC messaging of active inclusion and the existence of the ACCW are not enough to create an open and accepting environment for women across all churches. Structural factors, discrimination, and gendered expectations lead to a gap between policy and practice, and women experience the SGL in numerous ways.

Similar to the experiences of women in other career fields, women in pastoral leadership are negatively impacted by gender-based restrictions and expectations, misogyny, and organizational barriers in their pursuit of leadership. This study investigated the experiences of women in pastoral leadership in the ECC and the role of the support organization ACCW in its pursuit to create change. The focus of this chapter is to report the findings related to the following research questions:

RQ1: In what ways are women experiencing the stained-glass labyrinth (SGL) in the ECC?

RQ2: What are participants' perceptions of ECC leadership and their support of women?

RQ3: How does the ACCW affect the experience of the SGL for women?

Despite working within a denomination that has ordained women for 50 years, the lived reality of women stands in contrast to the ECC's declared identity of acceptance. Women experience the stained-glass labyrinth in many ways within the denomination, including a lack of jobs and advancement opportunities. Desirable positions are rare unless women are seeking out smaller, rural settings with solo pastoring opportunities. Many women are forced to look outside of the ECC for their first or subsequent positions. This is often because the congregational-led structure leaves decisions in the hands of local leadership and the denomination allows churches to hold the position of not hiring women, especially for solo- or lead-pastoring roles. Communication to and about women subjects them to both blatant and subtle discrimination as gender bias shapes a culture of exclusion. Gender-based expectations lead to unrealistic standards and strong critique, while women of color face additional barriers within this predominantly white organization. Unwritten policies limit women's pursuit of leadership, undermining the ECC's claim to support women in every church and in all levels of the organization.

The ECC's message of active inclusion is sent through its policies and resources, positive seminary experience they provide for women, and encouragement from leadership that this is a place for all to serve. Descriptive representation in the ECC is significant as women hold positions of power throughout all levels of leadership, including the current ECC president Rev. Tammy Swanson-Draheim. Despite these positive signals, participants expressed concern over

the direction of the ECC and/or questioned the sincerity of its policies and position. Some of these doubts are rooted in the inconsistency they see in how the ECC handles the tenet of “freedom in Christ.” The denomination has taken a clearer and firmer stance on other issues, such as baptism and LGBTQ+ inclusion, yet allows churches room to disagree when it comes to women in leadership. This loose interpretation of what is included in their commitment to “agree to disagree” results in women being openly discriminated against.

The ACCW exists to help support and advocate for women amid their challenges. Feedback varied among the participants, but many spoke positively about this group. Concerns were expressed, however, including a reluctance to join a “male-bashing” organization and confusion over what the ACCW does and how it works. The interview process revealed that the ACCW has had leadership changes in recent years and it is currently seeking to more clearly focus its efforts on a desire to better serve the denomination and its women.

Facing these relentless obstacles, participants see numerous ways that ECC leadership and the ACCW can help change their lived experience. This includes building awareness in male clergy, offering better support for women, and providing resources for local churches. Some tools are already in existence or in development by the denomination or the ACCW. These ideas and more could all help to change the future direction of the ECC so its policies match practice, leading to an environment in which all women have a chance to thrive in their leadership.

Aspects of the Stained-glass Labyrinth

Lack of Jobs and Advancement Opportunities

Most fundamentally, participants see a lack of jobs and advancement opportunities limiting their careers within the ECC. They see male peers of a similar age invited to try different

roles, advance through church leadership, and pursue their dream careers. Pastor L said it this way,

when I was coming up to 40, I think I was still 39, I started thinking about what the guys are doing that I went to school with. And . . . and I really entered into a grief process. I'm a good preacher. I'm not the best preacher, but I'm . . . I'm a pretty good preacher. And um, and I really developed as a preacher at this ECC church and they were very encouraging. It was, that was good in a lot of ways. And so I just, I brought my grief to the Lord. I . . . don't know, it's like it was like a season of lament for me. You know, it's just, it was probably two years where I just started like chipping at this issue and like - how big is this issue? Talking to friends, talking to mentors I think somewhere in my head, I thought being a woman was like this sliver of difference.

She saw the sliver was much bigger than she first believed as she tried to find a pastoral position in an ECC church. Available positions were not appealing, as many churches were “old white congregations that haven't changed anything in 50 years” or in locations that were not a good fit for her or her family. Even looking outside of the ECC, the options were limited and she is now at what she knows is “a failed church plant.”⁵ As Pastor L described this congregation, it has not been thriving, and she has now been tasked with turning things around.

So I work at a (non ECC) church that used to be pretty big, but it's now like 400 on a Sunday. But I am at . . . the planted campus, so it was planted a few years ago. I'm the preaching campus pastor of (one of) their campus(es). So . . . we're small like you know,

⁵ The term “church plant” refers to smaller branches of churches that can be launched from a larger and more stable church. Success for church plants varies and building a sustainable community is difficult, though with strong support from their source church, they can become vibrant congregations.

before I took it, my husband was like, “it's a failed church plant.” And . . . we had conversations. I'm like, “this is the best I can get.” And he's like, “I know.” And we're moving the family. We're in the middle of a move. The house is going on the market in two weeks. We bought a house out there incredibly. But so, my task is to grow this church.

Many like Pastor L are forced to look for work outside of the denomination for pastoral roles, especially when not seeking a job in children's ministry, traditionally viewed as a more suitable place for women.

As the opening narrative of this chapter illustrates, churches within the ECC are allowed to discriminate against women in their hiring processes. One woman pursued a position at a church, making it past their first round of consideration and traveled twice to the church to preach, interview, and meet parishioners. Church leaders indicated to the regional superintendent that they were going to offer her the role, but when it came time for the congregation to vote, she was shocked that her appointment was not approved. She shared the following story.

And then when they got to the vote on Sunday after I preached, there was one couple who was iffy about me because I'm a female. Yeah, and they apparently got these members who didn't regularly come to church, like they gathered this whole group together to come and vote no. And it's like, why not just like say from the get-go? Like don't bring us out there under these pretenses. And our superintendent was shocked too. (Pastor Q)

This seemed to be the work of a small number of congregants and the inclusion of non-involved members in the vote was the key factor. This pastor indicated relief that this happened before she arrived and was settled in the community, but it still impacted her negatively and a

more thorough investigation of the church's membership by the superintendent might have surfaced this opposition earlier.

Despite these blatant instances of discrimination, many women indicated confidence in the national leadership of the ECC, and they feel that the denomination is headed in the right direction. Yet others have concern about the denomination, as Pastor A shared.

I think we're going backwards in women in all levels of leadership. Partially because of a cultural fundamental resurgence. Now that we have a female president, it's like we hit the glass ceiling and what more do you want? And we used to talk more about women in leadership, and now that we have a female president, I feel like we talk about it a lot less. And . . . with that, the combination of the Covenant having less conversations to advance women and the cultural resurgence of fundamentalism. And our struggles with like human sexuality and race and some of the other things that the denomination has taken a stand on, for or against doesn't really matter. But we're letting in pastors who don't understand the full ethos of the Covenant, and they'll tolerate a female pastor, but their church would never hire one. In fact, in my surrounding area, we have multiple Covenant churches. And I couldn't get a job in any of them except for the one I'm at. And I just sat this morning, because (a local church is) looking for a pastor . . . they're looking for an interim since there's a pastoral transition. I said, would you take a woman? Because I've got some good names and they're like, no.

Others spoke of getting hired because their husbands were co-pastors, so that made it more palatable for some congregations to accept a woman. Even if they had more experience and education, their husbands were treated as the main leader, and they were treated with less respect. Pastor L said it this way,

we were co-leads . . . I had a lot more experience. I mean, he had none basically other than youth ministry jobs, interim stuff and coaching. But they received leadership from him far more readily than they received it from me.

Similarly, Pastor S shared that the congregation often looks to her husband as “head and lead pastor and that’s almost never the case in terms of vision, direction, what we’re doing.” Though her skills and personality combine for her to be the stronger voice of leadership and direction for the church, her husband is seen as the main leader simply due to his gender.

There are many reasons why women may struggle to find their preferred type of leadership role within the ECC and one key factor is tied to the organizational structure. To better understand their challenges, it is helpful to consider the ECC’s congregational polity design, which gives substantial power to its local churches.

The Challenges of Holding Power at the Local Level

The congregational design of the ECC leaves decisions in the hands of local churches, primarily the leadership team made up of elected church members. In this design, “member congregations carry out mission and ministry in their local context. Churches call their own pastors, own their own property, set their own budgets, and design their own ministry approach” (Evangelical Covenant Church, *Organization*, n.d., “Local Churches” section). This structure has strengths yet the challenge for marginalized groups is clear from what participants discussed. Pastor A summarized the views of many as she explained the downside and a potential help for women.

The problem is our polity. We’re a congregational polity church. And so, each church gets to decide themselves and so that’s what they’re doing. I can’t force everyone to . . . affirm women in all levels of leadership . . . you can’t force anything, right? But that’s

where I'm like, if we're forcing the baptism or we're forcing you know, we have taken a stand on human sexuality. Again, it's not forced, like . . . according to ethical guidelines, I'm required to . . . I can't withhold marriage counseling for a gay couple, but I can't do their wedding. We've drawn some lines in the sand, but we haven't drawn lines in the sand on women in ministry. And I'm not really wanting to make it . . . I don't really want to draw lines in the sand. Because I don't think that's going to advance . . . to advance the cause, so to speak, the way I want it to. But I do think we're lacking some education.

This tension was referenced frequently by interviewees. The structure creates inherent barriers to policy enforcement. At the same time, others say that forcing churches to align is not the solution. Calls for education, representation, and more opportunities for women to preach and lead were frequent.

Communication to and About Women

Beyond the organizational challenges, women experience active denial of their leadership in day-to-day congregational interactions as well. For example, communication plays a significant role in shaping the culture for women. Withheld titles, demeaning comments from colleagues and congregants, and patronizing descriptors appear in flagrant and subtle ways.

The title of “pastor” carries weight as one woman noted the toll it took to have to keep fighting for the respect and credibility that should have been hers.

I've explained working at my church as being like death by a thousand paper cuts. So, you know, nothing huge. No one's being like overtly like, you're not allowed to do that! But it's communicated over and over and over again by not calling me pastor. By not introducing me in ways that communicate respect and collegiality. (Pastor G)

The terms used to describe women and their responsibilities shape the culture and can create opportunities or barriers. Words said to pastors by peers and congregants also matter and can encourage or cut down. One woman's experience with her staff team highlights the damage that can be done by one individual, even if the lead pastor and others are inclusive.

Our youth pastor refused to speak to me for over a year. So, you know, it took me a while to kind of notice, but like we're a small pastoral team and so you know like, I guess . . . over a year ago at Midwinter (the ECC annual national conference) I had noticed, like he just he refused to look at me in staff meetings when I was speaking. I could hear him greet other people and he would never greet me - like basic, basic courtesy things. (He) would plan stuff in my area of ministry without consulting with me or talking with me. Finally, it got to the point where I realized this has been going on for a year and it was after he was introducing his interns, a group of mostly women, to all of our staff. And even though my office door was open, I could hear him introducing our accountant, our front desk volunteer . . . he walked completely past my office, didn't introduce me.

(Pastor G)

This deliberate exclusion was denied as intentional when she confronted him and is one specific example of the way that purposeful discrimination impacts the quality of leadership experience for women.

Direct comments can come from church members as well. Pastor A shared about interactions with congregants who do not endorse women in pastoral roles.

I've had people say to me a lot here, again, because (I am a) co-lead, "You know that was a really great sermon, but women aren't allowed to preach." And I'm like, which is it?

Was it a great sermon or women aren't . . . it can't be both. Like you're talking out of both sides of your mouth.

These kinds of communication encounters are part of what was described above as “death by 1000 paper cuts” in the elaboration on the daily challenges one pastor faces. Similar thoughts were shared by many others as the seemingly small moments are extremely influential. Things done and said in passing are unfortunately too common: notes left in mailboxes telling them that women “should be silent in churches;” comments about their makeup, hair, and clothes; and being talked over in meetings by male colleagues.

Even when supposedly including women pastors as equals, church members use different language when talking to them. For example, some will not use the word “preaching” as a description for a sermon. Pastor F shared that often after officiating at a funeral,

it was pretty common for somebody to come up after I preached. And say, “thank you so much for sharing. Thank you so much.” That would have been the typical way that they would say that. Not “thank you so much for your sermon. Thank you so much for preaching.”

Though this may appear to be a meaningless synonym switch, it points to the belief that women are restricted in the type of communication they can offer to a congregation. “Sharing” indicates a personal reflection that any congregational member could offer, it does not indicate a thoughtful analysis of sacred texts and authoritative interpretation of what they mean for congregants. Women in pastoral leadership fully understand the meaning behind this word switch. All these communication moments and more, contribute to a culture where women are devalued and overlooked.

Gender-based Expectations

As role congruity theory predicts, women who lead in the ECC are often held to different standards and judged more harshly. Gender-based expectations dictate how women should behave, speak, and function in their leadership roles. Within Christian contexts, a wide range of allowable behavior exists, with churches that fully ordain women presumably being the most accepting of women. Yet even in these settings, women can be seen as a threat, as Pastor F talked about male pastors who would not ride in the same car with a woman. If their team was traveling to an event, even nearby, separate cars were used. This policy, referred to as the Billy Graham Rule, is not uncommon in evangelical circles. Graham employed this policy in a time when women were not in positions of leadership, and it may have made some sense in that original context as any meetings with women would have been either with Graham's fans or those looking for pastoral care (Beaty, 2024). In other words, Graham and his colleagues showed some awareness of how power could be abused to victimize women. But brought into today's world of women and men leading together, this rule denies women power equal to their male colleagues and counterparts, or worse, suggests that their power as objectified sexual temptress trumps that of a pastor. This can leave women feeling degraded and mistrusted. As Beaty (2024) observes, "a rule that's meant to protect sexual integrity injects sexual possibility into situations that should be benign . . . (and) also disadvantages women in the workplace on multiple levels" (Why the rule won't eliminate scandals, para. 6). When a new pastor came into Pastor F's church and instituted this rule, she shared about the impact on her and other women in the office.

It was irritating! It was irritating. Because it felt like . . . I remember talking about it to the other women. Like, are we so . . . are we so dangerous? That we're going to get in the

car and on a 15-minute car ride, we're going to . . . I don't even, it was just, it was just, it was not our culture.

Women are not always treated with the respect they deserve from male colleagues in work conversations and team meetings either.

My boss treats me like a housewife who works for fun. And I have to like, keep reminding him that that's not my reality. I think, yeah, I think he makes assumptions about my motives sometimes. He's . . . I do think he actually, I do feel like he respects me. So I don't want to say that he doesn't respect me. But he does sometimes, I think, speak to me in a way he wouldn't necessarily speak to like men on the leadership team. And we have a strong enough relationship that I can say to him, I don't think you would speak to so-and-so like this. (Pastor V)

Participants talked of spending endless amounts of energy walking a line in meetings to try to get their ideas heard, while also not being too vocal to be labeled as bossy or dominating. In all church settings, women understand that they are expected to look a certain way and to dress and behave appropriately. Showing too much emotion can be labeled as wrong because it could make congregants uncomfortable. Not wearing makeup leads to some church members treating their pastor with less respect, so Pastor R makes the conscious choice to wear it daily. Appearance matters more for women, and they are often critiqued more than men would be on their weight, attire, and hairstyle.

As explained by participants, they and their female colleagues need much more education, training, and certification to be considered for higher leadership positions, while men can advance without those credentials. Though personality is involved as well, Pastor F explained the gender differences between her and a younger male colleague.

He's not ordained. He's commissioned. He doesn't have a D-min (Doctor of Ministry). I don't know that he's finished any kind of actual degree in seminary. But he never felt the need for it. And because he didn't. He didn't need it because he got to do everything he wanted to do, well-funded, because of who he was. And part of that is because he was a guy, part of it definitely is because of just his personality and who he is. I feel like the women, I for sure was trying to just kind of go by the book and, you know, I'll get this degree, I'll get ordained um and try to do what I felt like I was called to do that way. When there were other people just kind of, just kind of getting in there because, because they're winsome.

Another common thread was how frequently women are told to be patient and to withstand months or years of mistreatment in the name of giving others “grace,” something a male pastor would never encounter since their gender always has freedom to lead. Pastor B withstood years of being told to be patient, to wait for the congregation to come around to her being a lead pastor even though she had already served as an associate pastor in the church for 10+ years. The 2-year process for her involved the leadership team repeatedly postponing the consideration of her promotion. Finally, a vote for the congregation was scheduled, only to be pushed back yet again.

They had said that the leadership team wanted to hold off on moving forward because of timing. They were afraid because we were in a time of discernment (for another issue) that it was too much stress on the congregation. I took some time to pray and discern over that. For me, it was never a matter of patience. I was told often you're just not being patient enough. You just need to be patient. Which is awfully arrogant for people to say. And condescending a lot of times. But what I finally sensed from God in this process is it

doesn't matter if I'm patient or not. There are people in this church who are never going to see me as a lead pastor. And I can be patient. And I knew if I stayed, it would eventually happen. But I would not be given that autonomy and that voice. And it would take me three to four years to potentially have a voice. There would always be a pocket who would. But I don't know if it was a strong enough pocket to allow me to actually live or thrive. (Pastor B)

Like all marginalized groups, women are expected to be the educators for others to learn how they should be treated. Often expressing gratitude that they worked alongside men who want to advocate for women, they openly shared about the exhaustion that comes with constantly educating their colleagues.

One of the negative outcomes of the co-lead is the amount of thought energy that I put into helping my co-lead understand my perspective. Because he doesn't have to think about it. And he's super teachable, super humble. This would never work if he wasn't. But it works because he's . . . he's trying to be an advocate. Coming in, he made the assumption that because we were co-lead candidates, the church was already really great with women in leadership. And I'm like, oh no. They're only great with it because they love me and you're my covering. (Pastor A)

In addition to discrimination both subtle and blatant, women face these extra challenges of managing their identity in a way that meets the expectation of others and educating those who are open to learning. Women of color face another level of labor and stress in this predominantly white organization. Their stories and experience deserve attention, and it is crucial to consider their unique reality.

“Here is the Lane You Can Stay In” – Experiences of Women of Color

Women of color shared a range of feedback describing their experience within the ECC. Specific groups within the denomination offer opportunities for connection, such as the African American Ministers Association, Asociación Latina De La Iglesia Del Pacto Evangélico, the Indigenous Ministers Association, the Covenant Asian Pastors Association, and Covenant Women of Color. Participants referenced these groups in positive ways as places for relationships and support. Yet participants also shared about the unique challenges that they face within the ECC. As a woman with only a few others of her same ethnicity, Pastor C shared about being confused often with these other women.

I'm kind of unseen. It's not the norm. There's like even within the Covenant there's only a few of us, right? And so that like, and so . . . I am, just so happy to even have these other women. And we look nothing alike, but we are confused every time. I've been called all of their names. Every year, like, you know, it's crazy. Like every once in a while, we'll joke about, like we should make t-shirts say - my name is C, not this, not this.

Women of color are invited into the ECC and yet not welcomed into all spaces. Pastor W, shared about the impact of racism in her role.

There's times that, that is felt like, nobody has said this exactly but we're glad to have you. It looks even good that we do have you, yet here is as a woman, as a woman of color, here is the lane you can stay in. I believe that I have some respect. But the reality of racism is so deeply in our soil that bad, you got to be doing the work for real, for real. I have never, and that never is a big word. I have never felt like, man, I could fully lead in all of who I am without it being sort of um sidelined in a way, you know. I'm walking into a Swedish denomination you know percentage of, even though it's grown as far as

churches of color, it's predominantly a white space that I get to be in you know. And nobody has ever been snotty or blatant. There have been contexts where I've been in where I've seen maybe hasn't been directly at me, but where I've seen some, oh, that's like blatant racism right there. So that is a real thing, whether people want to acknowledge it or not. And I think the people who are really doing the work of anti-racism can acknowledge that. So to lead in those spaces, I think it's welcomed. But it's almost like what I have felt is, okay, here's the ceiling and you don't get to go any further. Nobody has said that, of course. Nobody would dare say that.

Some churches are known to oppose hiring anyone of color, and especially a woman.

One pastor of color talked about a very painful multi-year pastoral experience in a church with blatant racism, where several congregants refused to come into the sanctuary during the service but instead would sit in the basement and watch online because they “did not want to serve under a woman of color.”

Other stories were shared by women of color involving racism, sexism, and frequently a combination of both. There is no doubt that many more stories were left unspoken. The limitations of this project do not allow for an adequate treatment for the unique situations that women of color face, and further investigation is warranted to gain a clearer understanding of the unique difficulties they endure. What is evident is that the increased challenges for women of color add stress and difficulty to their leadership experience.

In a place where women are promised leadership opportunities, boundaries exist that seem out of alignment with the denomination's policies. Women are graduating at a higher rate from the ECC's seminary, something that ECC leadership touts as indicating progress and progressiveness. As one pastor shared about President Rev. Swanson-Draheim at a national

gathering, “she's bragging about 45% of the ordination class this June is women. And I'm like, well, that's great, but that doesn't mean we're going to have jobs for them. We're ordaining them into no job.” Despite policy that should mean otherwise, the stained-glass labyrinth is alive and well in the ECC. To better understand the harm caused by these limitations, it is crucial to analyze what the ECC presents as their stance on women in leadership.

The ECC Message: Active Inclusion

“We seek to be a diverse and welcoming church that affirms the calling and gifts of the entire body of Christ. We support God’s gifting of women by urging churches to encourage women in their congregations to embrace leadership” (The Evangelical Covenant Church, Serve clergy, women in ministry, para. 1.). The denomination’s identity declares it as a place for celebrating women in leadership, offering opportunities and supporting women in their pursuit of ministry leadership and/or a pastoral call. Through formal and informal communication, the ECC proclaims itself as a place for equal leadership. Their policies, the seminary’s positive environment for women, and other messaging from leadership all share a consistent message of acceptance. Yet its structures and practices do not always align with this messaging.

Policies and Resources

Compared to some other Protestant denominations the ECC does go to extra lengths to provide leadership opportunities for women, including ordaining women since 1976 (Johnston et al., n.d.). Throughout the websites and documents accessible to the public, the ECC confirms their commitment to women in leadership in numerous places. Within a page devoted to detailing how they serve their clergy, the above quotation provides a broad statement of the ECC’s acceptance of women in leadership. From here under “Women in Ministry,” clicking on “more resources” leads to links to nine specific categories to learn more. This content includes

articles, books, and Bible studies that explain and defend the ECC's position on women and highlight the powerful stories of women leaders through the history of the organization. Everything provided here is accessible to potential or current congregants and it all could be helpful for individual churches to use to educate members.

The ECC policy clearly states that women are not only included in their denomination but also have no limitations on their leadership roles. This is not the norm in all Christian churches or other work settings. As Eagly and Karau (2002) found, "leadership has been predominantly a male prerogative in corporate, political, military, and other sectors of society" (p. 573). When policies exist that seem to upend that reality, practices should change. Yet even when formal policy states that women should be included, limitations remain in place (Danberry, 2017). As previously noted, Mann (2004) states the ECC's stance as "the biblical basis for service in the body of Christ is giftedness, a call from God, and godly character – not gender" (p. 5).

Though many denominations have written policies that intentionally place women in a subservient position within organizations, marriages, and society, some churches including the ECC claim to have a more equitable system in place. It is tempting to point to ordination within some denominations as a major shift and this recognition is important. But even with ordination as a possibility for decades, many women still lack the opportunity to lead (Barr, 2021; Danberry, 2017). There is a need to address policy change in many religions and churches, but within the ECC the need is simply to appropriately implement policies already in place.

Positive Seminary Experiences

Participants reported having a positive experience at North Park Theological Seminary, the ECC's seminary which currently has a student population that is 53% women (North Park Theological Seminary, *Community and values*, n.d.). They acknowledged that though there are

problems at North Park, their experience there was overwhelmingly positive. Several of the women spoke fondly of their time at seminary, where they felt affirmed in their calling and leadership and had opportunities to use their gifts. They shared about professors who helped them learn and thrive while also recognizing reality; they see the obstacles that exist for their women graduates and want to work for change. This combination of acceptance and an acknowledgement of challenges combine to make North Park Seminary a place for women to flourish.

Messaging from Leadership

Many women believe that ECC leadership is sincere in their affirmation of women in leadership and they experience this through various aspects of the denomination. Most participants believe that leaders are aware of the problems and are working toward making it better. As Pastor G shared about the obstacles women face, “the thing that makes me so excited about the Covenant is like, they're addressing it. They're aware that this is a problem.” Another woman agreed with this endorsement of the ECC’s efforts.

I feel like the position of the denomination is we're on our way . . . but we don't have it all figured out and we haven't arrived. And I just thought that was really healthy. You know, even though they green light women into all these roles, instead of being like, yep, look at us we did it. You know, they're like, hey, there's 16%⁶ of lead pastor roles being filled by women right now. What's going on there . . . so I appreciate that there's organizations and people thinking about that in our denomination. (Pastor P)

⁶ Participant is referencing an earlier statistic. As previously shared, currently the ECC reports 18% of churches have a woman in a lead or co-lead pastor role. The Evangelical Covenant Church, *Gather 2026: Called and gifted panel*, 2026).

Though not a unanimous opinion, several similar statements were made by many participants and often were combined with excitement and hope for how ECC leadership aims to see more women in leadership. This support surfaces in two main modes of communication: the denominational policy and resources that affirm their stance on women in leadership as discussed above and through messages directly from ECC President Rev. Tammy Swanson-Draheim and other ECC leaders.

The ECC's policy and statements about women and leadership have been a refreshing change of pace for many participants. As Pastor T shared, "I would say that the Covenant is a gift because for all its flaws, it has been a safe haven for so many of us who feel called and gifted in ministry." For Pastor P, coming from a denomination that had a clear stopping point for women pursuing leadership, the ECC has been a place for her to heal and grow in her leadership in a supportive environment. Discussing her previous denomination, she said this,

the church I was in, I was not allowed to be a pastor. There was just ongoing turmoil of what I could and couldn't do. I was the only female in leadership with an MDiv (Master of Divinity) at a large congregation. It was just . . . I was constantly running into - you can do this, you can't do this, you can . . . and it was just like whiplash. It was so discouraging to see my peers in ministry that were male, did not have MDivs. You know, it's just like maddening [motioned with her hands on temples to illustrate frustration] like . . . you know, 15 years younger than me, like, go ahead guys, like . . . receive your ordination and then (me) being nearly 40 with an MDiv and 20 years of ministry experience being like, yep, you can get the license but . . . (Pastor P)

Comparatively speaking, the ECC is setting policies in place to give women many more opportunities than Pastor P's previous location of service. Policies affirm that women can ascend

to all leadership positions and all pastors within the denomination are asked to affirm this endorsement of women. Each one is required to write a paper explaining how they will support women on their staff teams and in their congregations. Within the church planting branch of the denomination, many participants discussed the encouragement they have felt with the clarity of ECC's stance on women. As one pastor explained her experience with this division, "as far as my experience with the assessment center, the training, the launch into planting - there's been nothing but encouragement and support and cheering on." Others also mentioned that this space is one where women are affirmed, encouraged, and put into positions of leadership.

Communication from national leadership was another factor that many women cited to illustrate the denomination's commitment to women. Participants shared about personal communication with Rev. Swanson-Draheim as well as conference superintendents. Pastor G provided an example of a comment from the ECC President that affirmed her leadership.

She came and talked to me directly, and said I hope you and others are going to create resources that we can use to navigate this political season to help our churches care for immigrants and refugees. You know, I don't know her well but like, well the fact that the denominational president was willing to talk to me and affirm me to say what you bring to our denomination is valuable and needed right now, that meant a lot.

Pastor T noted the significance of national leadership saying "women and men" when speaking about both genders.

Aside from just making space at tables and listening for voices and their dialect, they say women and men. They begin with women and then men . . . and that posture. And then I feel like I can come to the space and say men and women because I'm honoring their

existence too, right? But it seemed like it's a small thing, but it wasn't small. It isn't small.

Others noted the endorsement of co-leaders or senior pastors referring to them as pastor.

I'm really fortunate. Because even in small ways, like our congregation is super casual.

Everybody's first name, you know, even pastors. But when my senior pastor, who's a male talks about me from the pulpit, you know, whether it's just an announcement or in any reference he specifically says Pastor K, not just K, so that is from his mouth. Just as a common practice, he's validating my identity in the church. And so, I think it's those kinds of things that really help the congregation come along. (Pastor K)

Interactions like these, as well as communication delivered in speeches and presentations were referenced as a positive sign that leadership is supportive. In addition to direct statements, more than one participant mentioned the impact of having a woman in the President role for the first time in ECC history.

I think just like having a woman president, you know, it just makes the power dynamics, it makes it more flat. She came to our class. She took time to talk with me and affirm me. She shares about her grandkids from the platform. So the different perspective of what it looks like to be a leader, not just accomplishments and pedigrees and relationships but I'm a grandma and I'm a mom and I'm a widower and I'm a friend, like she leads with that. She leads with the relationships and so having been in different spaces you know that sometimes that are like church planting circles are so bro-y and so gross. (Pastor G)

This difference in how leadership is portrayed is significant and opens the door for other women to lead with their full selves. Rev. Swanson-Draheim's presence, leadership, and

communication has had an impact for many women within the ECC. Some, like Pastor P, feel that intentional effort is made to highlight women on stage at regional and national levels.

We'll have like Pastor Tammy like giving this address and things. Our conferences are definitely forward thinking about like or . . . intentional, I should say about what who's on stage and um, so I just feel like there's a lot of care given to making sure women in ministry are seen and highlighted and heard from and their voice is like amplified.

This positive endorsement of ECC leadership was not shared by all. Pastor E discussed the challenges the ECC is facing considering broader cultural trends. She was encouraged to see a women of color clergy group emerge, where women are “finding life in like being together in their work and finding a denomination that is more empowering than what they had been in.” But then she followed that up with doubts about where the ECC may be going in the future.

Do I think white rural MAGA, fundamentalist men care about what those women of color think? I would have said five years ago, well, out of shame they won't push back against it. But I think the current state of affairs is to be proud of one's white maleness and to feel like you can just say DEI and whatever and dismantle that. So, do I feel hopeful (for) a vibrant egalitarian movement championed by the whole of the denomination? I don't know. (Pastor E)

She went on to explain that positions will continue to exist for women who want to serve in associate roles, in church planting, or in churches that cannot afford to hire a married male with kids but will be grateful that a single woman will come. In addition, she explained that other leadership roles will still be filled by women because the ECC likes how that looks as a claimed part of their identity. But she also noted that the contrast in supposed ECC identity and lived

experiences for women creates a level of dissonance that will get too difficult for some to endure.

Though there may be positive signs for many that ECC leadership is intent to fully endorse and include women in pastoral roles, Pastor E was not alone in her doubts about the sincerity and application of policies at the local church level. Many noted inconsistency they see in how the ECC interprets their aim to “honor an old maxim . . . ‘In essentials, unity. In nonessentials, freedom. In all things, love’” (Evangelical Covenant Church, ECC history, n.d.).

Inconsistency Between Policy and Practice: Two Interpretations of Freedom

Before addressing how to remove the stained-glass labyrinth, a key characteristic of the ECC must be considered. As mentioned, the denomination prides itself on being able to “agree to disagree.” Since its founding in 1885, one of its six key tenets true to its original roots is “freedom in Christ” when it comes to non-essential topics (Evangelical Covenant Church, Beliefs and Identity, n.d.). This has been touted as a distinctive element since the ECC was founded. The difference between essential and non-essential typically centers around the question of salvation. Their website addresses this commitment in discussion of its history, foundations, and its present-day beliefs. The message is clear, as a church they profess to stick to the essentials and give freedom for disagreement on issues that involve varied views.

Two topics that the denomination has addressed, one longstanding and one more recently managed, shed light on how the ECC has handled differences in beliefs. Participants mentioned both baptism and inclusion/exclusion of the LGBTQ+ community as topics that demonstrate inconsistent application of the policy to the disadvantage of women clergy.

As an example of the ECC showing their commitment to freedom of Christ and respecting different views, both infant and believer baptism are upheld as valid practices⁷. One pastor explained the significance of this issue.

And so early on in the Covenant formation, they decided that all Covenant pastors had to sign a baptismal covenant, that they would not divide the church over the issue of baptism. So certainly, God is working both ways. Let's not divide the church over that. They allowed this third way. And for 75, 80 years, the baptismal covenant was lifted up as this amazing way that Covenanters held theological differences. (Pastor E)

Pastors are given time to adjust to this perspective after any wrestling they must do in their own minds, but eventually they are expected to adhere to the practice of accepting both or to move from the ECC. While their personal views can affirm one approach as preferred, they are not to disparage the other practice from the pulpit, and they are required to support the preferences of all congregants on this issue.

This freedom policy should not include discrimination against women since the ECC has communicated in numerous ways that it is a place for women to lead. As previously discussed, the denomination specifies that their policy on women in leadership is one built on the Bible, not cultural pressure. Therefore, using the “freedom to disagree” explanation for discrimination is not a valid application of this tenet.

⁷ Traditionally many denominations support only one form of baptism. Those who practice believer's baptism specify that a person must be able to express their own desire to be baptized. This is seen as a symbolic step they choose to take to demonstrate their commitment to Christ. Some denominations support infant baptism, which can be seen as a step in a person's salvation journey disconnected from their own volition. The ECC is rare in its acceptance of both practices.

Changing the Ethos

Some see the ECC moving away from the roots of “freedom in Christ” with the handling of questions around inclusion of the LGBTQ+ community. This was a repeated topic as participants referenced the difference between the hard lines being drawn around LGBTQ+ inclusion, while churches are allowed to diverge from the ECC’s affirmation of women in leadership. The denomination’s position is “faithfulness in heterosexual marriage, celibacy in singleness – these constitute the Christian standard” (The Evangelical Church, *Embrace*, para. 1, n.d.). Marriage outside of heterosexual relationships is viewed as wrong and pastors are not allowed to officiate or participate in any way in a LGBTQ+ couple’s ceremony. Pastors and churches have been removed from the ECC for performing gay weddings and being affirming of those who identify as LGBTQ+.

Many participants believe that any healthy conversation around this topic and community has been shut down, violating the ethos of the denomination to hold the tension of varied beliefs. Some feel that the ECC’s commitment to having freedom in Christ should include allowing varied views on inclusion. This abandonment of the central value of “agree to disagree” was discussed frequently by interviewees. Pastor H shared about the loss of this value in the context of significant decisions made at the ECC’s annual meeting in 2019.

The denomination kicked out two pastors and a church around this issue (of LGBTQ+ inclusion). And very much broke the historical context of the denomination. Like the distinctive of the denomination was, we're here together because we agree on all the major things and the minor things we give each other space and freedom. That has been the historical. (But) the thing that makes the Covenant unique was no longer holding true, essentially.

Holding the tension is a core identity piece for the ECC and participants noted how important this value is to them personally. One pastor pointed out that if pastors and churches can hold different views on a sacrament⁸, like baptism, then certainly varied views around a non-sacrament should be allowed. Apart from their personal stances on LGBTQ+ inclusion, most pointed to the inconsistency they see in how ECC leadership is demanding compliance in one area and not another. Some believe that the “agree to disagree” commitment should allow for different views around women in leadership especially among congregants, just as it should leave room for different beliefs on inclusion for the LGBTQ+ community. Others think there should be more enforcement for women in leadership policies, since “active inclusion” is professed. Regardless of their feelings on policy enforcement, the main concern was inconsistency. They pointed out that if the ECC is going to excommunicate a church or a pastor over LGBTQ+ inclusion, then they should be doing the same for failing to accept women clergy.

Pastor B compared the handling of the questions around LGBTQ+ inclusion to how dissent against women in leadership is addressed. Pastors must write a paper endorsing women in ministry, but she explains how that does not always mean freedom from discrimination.

(It) is fascinating because (the ECC) is taking a stance in the Covenant when it comes to human sexuality. You cannot dissent at all. You have to be full (in support). And some of these issues, they're okay with you don't have to personally believe it. You just can't advocate against it. So it's one that they have not put at the same equity level. So that part is very fascinating because you do have churches that like, they've signed that paper, but

⁸ A sacrament is defined as “ a Christian rite (such as baptism or the Eucharist) that is believed to have been ordained by Christ and that is held to be a means of divine grace or to be a sign or symbol of a spiritual reality” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.) These practices are held in high regard and are seen as sacred to the tradition.

at the same point, they don't hire women or they don't do this or they don't look at women on the leadership team, but yet . . . So, it was said but not actually followed through.

Whereas the human sexuality, if that happens, you go to a board to potentially get voted out. I mean, it's a pretty intense process.

Most participants expressed dissatisfaction and called for consistency. Pastor O said it this way.

Part of my frustration is if you're going to start penalizing churches for their stance on sexuality. Then you owe it to us to start penalizing churches that are not supporting women in ministry. So, whatever you do, do it consistently. And they're not doing that, which is a huge source of frustration for me.

Though the value of freedom was spoken of in high regard by participants, this tenet can be invoked as a justification for discrimination against women clergy. They are told to be patient and to allow for other views within the denomination, and to recognize that some churches are still a work in progress. Meanwhile, male pastors are allowed to preach complementarianism as the only right view and to exclude women from leadership. Religious settings endorsing complementarianism use the concept “to justify traditional heteronormative relationships between men and women by which men are the leaders (i.e. masculine) and women are the supporters (i.e. feminine), thereby complementing each other in these ways” (Lauve-Moon, 2021, p. 158). As explained earlier, it is claimed that both genders are equal and that people simply have different roles to fill, yet this structure places men in more authority and power.

We see three different responses with the topics of baptism, LGBTQ+ inclusion/exclusion, and women and leadership. Though “congregations pledge mutually to support the principles, policies, programs, and institutions of the Covenant” this is not enforced

equally across all issues (Evangelical Covenant Church, Organization, n.d.). Pastors are allowed to malign egalitarian beliefs and exclude women from leadership. Churches are allowed to specify only male applicants will be accepted for their pastoral positions. Multiple participants pointed to the double standard exacted to between these issues, leading them to doubt the sincerity of leadership's support of women.

In contrast to the differing views on national ECC leadership, most participants saw the existence of the ACCW as a positive sign that the denomination wants equity and justice for women in ordained leadership. Experience and knowledge of the ACCW varied among participants but many expressed gratitude that the organization exists and/or a desire to get more involved themselves.

The Role of the ACCW

The ACCW began in 1998 to support women and advocate for change. Its five main roles are advocacy, education and empowerment, fellowship, celebration, and resources (ACCW, *What we do*, n.d.). As mentioned, their motto is “until the culture of our churches matches the ethos of the denomination, we have work to do” and it recognizes the inconsistency within the ECC (ACCW, *Home*, n.d.) At the annual ECC conference called Midwinter, the ACCW hosts a gathering for women to share about challenges and feel heard and supported. Some men are involved and participants spoke of the need to include more male pastors in this group. When asked if groups like the ACCW could help in improving women's experiences in the ECC, Pastor F talked about the role men need to play to help women find lead pastor roles.

If the only people that are going to their trainings or their resources if they're only women, that's not going to be enough. It has to be men. It has to, to be a part of it, which I kind of hate, but it just has to. It has to.

A similar thought was echoed by others, such as Pastor R, who talked about the need for everyone to be involved, with the goal of not needing the group in the future.

And it's like their voices have been silenced for so long. They've been told they can't be in this space for so long. It's . . . everybody needs to be in ACCW. And when everybody is, then it won't be, because then everybody will be equal so that's really the goal of ACCW. It's not just like this little side project of women, it's changing the culture to - wouldn't it be great when there is no need for advocacy for, because women are completely seen as equals. That's what we want to get to. It's not there yet. That's why it exists.

Participants shared gratitude for the ACCW and positive comments about what they have experienced. At the annual conference, the ACCW luncheon was talked about as a safe space for receiving support and advice on challenges. For some participants, its existence signaled that the ECC values women and “this is important. We recognize this is a need.” Pastor G elaborated on her experience at the annual gathering.

At that lunch, actually, it was women, you know we . . . we paired up or got in trios for prayer, and I mentioned to them about (a problem with her local congregation) and they were so empathetic. And they were both like, you need to report this. And so it was because that space was created that I was able to meet other women who are able to speak into my life and say, there's things that can be done about this, and this is who you need to talk to and this there's no reason you should have to deal with this suffering alone. So, I mean, they created space for those relational connections that could help me navigate the organizational challenges and hold people accountable.

In contrast, Pastor A shared that she has not been a part of the ACCW intentionally and she shared why.

I don't want to be part of a group that's like, "we do it all because the men can't hack it" and kind of almost male bashing. When I think that we need to work together with our male colleagues instead of bash them because they suck and they can't do as much as we can, you know, or they don't move out of the way so that way we have space. I think most people would say, oh, that's not the attitude of ACCW, but I think it has been.

Though this pastor spoke positively of the current ACCW president, her reluctance to get involved remains. Pastor S expressed hesitancy about the group for a different reason. She feels that the complexity of leadership challenges can be lost when assumptions are made.

So everything is actually assumed to be because you're a woman, you experience this, because you're a woman you weren't hired and . . . I have never heard of like well, maybe it's because you actually have these deficiencies? Maybe it is because I'm not involved. But I have never gotten the sense that it's a space that is trying to speak broadly or hold the complexity of the problem. (Pastor S)

Though she did recognize the value in having a space where barriers are acknowledged and women can voice concerns, she believed that the ACCW may be too narrow-minded in its advocacy work, always blindly supporting women no matter what.

There was some lack of understanding of what the ACCW does among participants, even for those who were more hopeful about its existence. Some women shared about the resources and support that the group offers, and that they knew that the ACCW would advocate in specific situations if they were called in to help. But there was confusion about how active the group is in

its advocacy work and an acknowledgement “their place is to try to help. But they are all full-time vocational pastors too. And you can only do so much when you're already stretched thin.”

The group partners with other efforts, whether it be an initiative to host cohorts that encourage women to pursue their calling, or other groups like women of color clergy groups. As noted, the Four More initiative encouraging churches to invite four more women to preach from their pulpits was started by Rev. Dr. Devyn Chambers-Johnson in 2018. Though not begun as a sole ACCW action, this is one example of the important role that specific challenges can serve. A similar initiative in March of 2026 called “March into those pulpits” was launched by the ACCW during Women’s History Month to encourage churches to invite women to preach. Participants believed that these efforts, whether initiated by individuals or the ACCW itself, are significant steps and the ACCW can play a role in their support and promotion. These practical initiatives are key to changing the organizational culture to one of full inclusion for women.

The interview process revealed that the ACCW has recently been focused on discerning their next direction, with new leadership in place. Members have expressed a desire to hear about this study and gain insights on what is needed for women in pastoral leadership and potential changes that would help the ECC move forward. One of their main areas of focus is the inconsistency of local churches not affirming women and not aligning to the identity of the ECC in this way. They know of statistics, for example, in recent years the average wait time for a man looking for a new pastoral position was three years and for women it was five. Issues at every level are well known, motivating ACCW leadership to discern the steps that will create lasting changes.

The messaging of “active inclusion” is publicly proclaimed, endorsed and taught by the seminary, and believed by participants. Women are graduating at high rates from North Park

after encouraging and growing experiences at the seminary and regional and national leaders are often supportive. In addition, the ACCW offers a level of advocacy and support for women. Participants offered several practical suggestions for how true change could happen through intentional efforts from ECC leadership and the ACCW.

Suggestions for Improvement

Perhaps surprisingly, amid these challenges, many participants voiced confidence in the denomination and have felt supported in their leadership by those at higher levels. But they also indicated that changes need to be made for them to feel this endorsement and to see more opportunities in local churches. The ACCW is already taking steps toward making their priorities and resources clearer, having recently launched a more complete website. This site presents who ACCW leadership is and how to be involved, and it explains the five missional priorities in depth as noted above. This newly revamped website should address some of the confusion and lack of knowledge about the ACCW that participants expressed.

Specific steps suggested include making resources more known and available to pastors and churches, as well as a way for women to more easily get support. Pastor B shared the challenge of having to reach out herself when she was going through a tough time.

And the reality is, is when people are struggling, they don't have the bandwidth to [ask for] help. It's kind of like asking somebody in ICU to take care of themselves. We do not have the resources to actually help people who are needing the help, (to) actually get (access to) the help.

One pastor shared that in her experience, the ACCW has felt more like a formal business organization than a place offering practical help. Requests for resources and support to be clearer and more accessible were echoed by others, both tools from the ACCW and ECC itself. Adding

resources to better equip men to support women was another key aspect, as men in pastoral leadership need to be made more aware of the direct and subtle ways they help or hinder the women they work alongside.

The Role of Men in Pastoral Leadership

Women can feel the need to educate their male colleagues on their experiences, in the hope that men will engage with the congregation on their behalf. As has been mentioned, it is vital that women are referred to with the title of Pastor and included in communication as equals. But men can and should do more.

He was always trying to loop us together. And we've been pretty intentional about dividing preaching and, you know, some of the responsibilities. But then year two, I'm like, okay, yeah, that was great that you said that on the platform, but you need to do more. And trying to tell him what that, what more is, like more is teaching a “women in ministry” class because it's not my soapbox to stand on. It's your job to make space and advocate and answer people's questions. (Pastor A)

The denomination should help men understand their part in creating more opportunities and acceptance for women. Inviting more men to be involved with the ACCW and having their voices heard is important to further solidify the unity of leadership on this issue. Education and empowerment, a key priority of the ACCW, proved to be a theme in women’s stories of what is needed to help build true equality in the ECC. Education for men could include coaching on how to facilitate inclusive spaces, both within team settings and within the larger church body. This could be as simple as sitting with women at a lunch where groups tend to segregate by gender and doing what you can to avoid “boys club” behaviors that disadvantage women, such as

making decisions at the golf course or in other casual settings where women are not automatically included.

Subtle gender bias sometimes comes from an unawareness in men of how their words and behaviors exclude the women in their presence. Pastor G talked about being out on a hike with other pastors while attending a conference.

Three of the male pastors started talking about sermon prep and were asking each other, like, how do you prep? They didn't ask me at all because I'm not a lead pastor, even though I preached for almost 25 years.

Women face the challenge of either constantly educating even well-intentioned peers or being left out of conversations and decisions. Resources for male pastors in the ECC could help lessen this burden as would offering consistent support for women.

Better Support for Women

Women need support and mentorship from others, as well as more recognition from ECC leadership that their often-unique situations could use the attention of the denomination. The advocacy they must have for themselves can take a toll and many participants spoke of the need for mentorship and support from women and men. Pastor O summarized the thoughts of most when she said, “if I didn't have like mentors and/or colleagues that understood me, I wouldn't have made it this far.” Relationships were talked about as “lifelines”, and many stories reflected the power of a leader’s words in encouraging them to consider ministry at all or to pursue their calling despite the obstacles. Relationships help women find and celebrate their gifts and take steps toward pursuing their dreams and goals. The ACCW’s focus on celebration, and fellowship flows out of the reality that relational support is crucial.

Other practical tips given for ECC leadership include making it easier for bivocational pastors and those who are primary care givers to attend conferences and retreats. Often each local church provides the funding for one pastor to attend, reducing the chance that women who are often not solo lead pastors will be able to go. Other assistance like childcare at the conferences could also help, as Pastor V explained.

There is a lot of connection and network within the denomination that isn't realistic for people who are bivocational or part-time. Even just flying to conferences. If you've got another job or you have little kids at home and you can't pack up and spend \$800 and fly across the country. Even in our conference, we have a clergy retreat that I have never attended because it's just too hard to get to . . . being more aware of the reality that more pastors are part-time or bivocational (and) are women, shifting out of kind of 1940s and 50s male breadwinner (thinking).

Women are combatting tendencies to cater to others and behave in ways that they are conditioned to behave. Helping their male colleagues learn ways to support and include them could help in significant ways, as well as helping women acknowledge and eradicate their proclivity to dismiss inappropriate comments, withdraw from a conversation, or disparage their own contribution. Pastor I addressed this tendency for women and the need for the ECC to create more awareness for women of these pitfalls.

I think something that might be really helpful for denominations to know is that it's not just about like preparing women to be pastors, but kind of helping, it would be helpful to have something that helps women unlearn those things that are like, oh, you can't complain about this or, oh, you shouldn't make a big deal or . . . I think women are really

conditioned not to make other people uncomfortable, even if the other person is the one that's like making it weird.

Adding content in seminary courses to create awareness of these tendencies could help women thrive in their leadership. Women also need to be given the freedom to lead in whatever manner they choose. One pastor said, “enough of us are in the doors now that we may not have to be like men anymore. And so, what does it mean to lead more feminine, and will a church follow that?” This leads to important questions around how the ECC should approach churches and congregants who are not aligned to the ECC’s commitment to women.

Addressing the Local Churches

As participants discussed the inconsistency at the local level, many called for the denomination to hold pastors and churches accountable to support women in all levels of leadership. They believe that ECC leadership could do more to assure that all pastors are aligned and in agreement, rather than continuing to allow churches to remain in the ECC who will not accept a woman’s resume. Annual reviews include questions about how pastors are supporting women in leadership, but participants are unclear on what, if anything, is done if a pastor expressed disagreement. Interviewees believe that accountability in these scenarios is needed. Other ideas mentioned include superintendents investigating a church’s perspective, working with pastors and using existing or new resources to evaluate where congregants are on the Continuum of Justice (Chambers Johnson, 2020). Standardizing and utilizing resources to educate congregants on the ECC’s view could encourage those in opposition to reconsider their view. As discussed, the inconsistency of how the ECC is addressing LGBTQ+ inclusion/exclusion and women and leadership was a key finding shared by participants. This theme led to specific suggestions for how ECC leaders should address this difference.

Conclusion

This study illustrates the challenges that women in pastoral leadership face in the ECC. Investigating their experiences reveals a disconnect between policy and practice and provides clear examples of the specific challenges of the SGL. The lack of jobs and advancement opportunities are influenced by its structure with local churches having license to operate as they see fit. Dismissal of their leadership is frequent, due to unfair gender expectations and deeply rooted discrimination. Women of color face additional obstacles and reported feeling unseen and limited in their leadership. Though a message of active inclusion permeates the organization in several ways, women see a lack of consistency in support from leadership and how other policies are enforced.

The ACCW serves as a voice for equality for the organization, but participants were unclear on the extent of its work. Suggestions offered for improvement included educating male pastors on conscious and unconscious bias, offering better support for women, and addressing the inconsistency that they see at the local level. These findings point to ways that the ECC and the ACCW can act now to create a more just organizational culture where women can lead fully and serve in ways that maximize their impact.

Chapter 5 - Discussion of Findings and Implications

We know that when she steps up to right a wrong,

She will fight to bring others along

To the network, into the conversation,

Working together to change communities

And nations, our world

Made all the stronger the longer

The women are able to sit at the table.

It is her strength, her story, and her spirit

Which inspires other vital voices

to speak up when they hear it.

So let it be said that light will be shed

When our world is led by women ahead

of the headlines, those

Who were first on the frontline,

These women who stand up,

knowing the wind

Not by where it is, but by where it is blowing,

Leading worlds not by how society is

But by where change is going.

— Amanda Gorman, *We Rise*

In the live performance of this poem at Variety's Power of Women Event, Gorman's (2021) words served as a call to action for women to speak up and join in supporting one

another, and for those in power to recognize their voices and listen (Gorman, 2021; Yuma, 2021). The collective voice of women is powerful, and their leadership is crucial to the success of organizations, broader society, and every corner of the world. This qualitative research study investigated the experience of women in pastoral leadership in the ECC to better understand their experiences and consider what changes could increase leadership opportunities and magnify their impact. Listening to their stories gives us the best understanding of the burdens they carry and the most powerful insights to create change.

The theoretical framework of role congruity theory and feminist standpoint theory formed a foundation for probing the unique experiences and challenges that women face. These theories point to the need to hear directly from women as they are the only ones qualified to provide a clear picture of their reality. The following research questions served to guide this endeavor:

RQ1: In what ways are women experiencing the stained-glass labyrinth (SGL) in the ECC?

RQ2: What are participants' perceptions of ECC leadership and their support of women?

RQ3: How does the ACCW affect the experience of the SGL for women?

Through 38 interviews with women who have served or are serving in pastoral leadership in the ECC, results indicated a difference between practice and policy, especially at the local level of individual congregations. The ECC presents an identity of active inclusion through policies and resources, providing a positive experience for women at their seminary, and articulating to women through group and individual communication that they are welcome in all levels of the denomination. However, women face a lack of job opportunities and struggle to find roles that fit their career goals. They experience discrimination through gender-specific

expectations of leadership and harmful communication from congregants and colleagues that undermine their emotional well-being. They are asked to be patient, gracious, and serve in roles where their leadership is questioned or dismissed.

Conditions for women in pastoral leadership have drastically improved in the ECC since the first few generations of ordained women, and relative to other Christian spaces, the denomination has made progress. This reality, combined with the conviction of women to follow a greater calling and their willingness to put others before themselves, contributes to a mostly positive view of ECC leadership in participants. Yet they did not shy from naming the problems they see, including the inconsistency in how other issues are decisively addressed within the denomination while discrimination against women is allowed to thrive. Women of color face additional challenges that add to the cost that they pay in pursuing their careers.

The ACCW exists to change the organizational culture of the ECC and remove obstacles to women's leadership that are far too commonplace. Most participants had a positive view of the ACCW, though many were unfamiliar with the specific ways that it advocates for and supports women. As previously described, the organization focuses on five main roles: advocacy, education and empowerment, fellowship, celebration, and resources (ACCW, What we do, n.d.). Through efforts like the "March into those pulpits" initiative in March of 2026, the ACCW is working to increase representation and build cohesion between the ECC's claimed identity and the lived leadership experiences for women in local churches. Participants offered other ideas for both the ACCW and ECC leadership to employ to see lasting change, including correcting the misguided and hurtful actions of male colleagues, offering better support for women, addressing problems of consistency at the local level, and continuing and/or increasing representation in all areas of the ECC.

Despite the numerous obstacles, women in pastoral leadership in the ECC continue to persevere. Many participants have found ways to thrive, adapt as needed, work in roles that are not their first choice, and do what they can within limitations that are undeserved. They faithfully serve, impacting their congregations, communities, and the denomination as they patiently wait for the tide to change. This research calls for ECC leaders to move beyond their recognition that problems still exist and to work for change so that current and future generations of women can be unencumbered in their leadership. The extra strain of constantly navigating the SGL will never be fully removed for women, but ECC leadership has significant power to lessen its impact if they choose to take responsibility and address obvious issues.

Implications are significant for ECC leaders, other denominations and religious organizations, and secular work settings where women are promised leadership opportunities that do not materialize. ECC structure and culture are two key factors contributing to the SGL for women. I offer a few large-scale structural recommendations; however, most proposed solutions are interpersonal due to the distributed power structure of the ECC. Strong control at the local level makes it difficult to suggest large-scale changes; however, I do offer steps that ECC leadership can take to address unaligned views on women in leadership and close the gap between policy and practice. The relational solutions closely align with the push from earlier ECC research for changing the organizational culture.

On the denominational level, leaders can show their commitment to women by holding pastors and regional leadership accountable and ensuring that all are affirming of women in pastoral leadership. The national office should implement a process for churches to self-assess on this issue, and there should be standardization of the use of educational resources to address congregations without alignment. Representation is key and will continue to be instrumental in

changing the minds of those in opposition. I recognize that without a top-down design and with their commitment to being a denomination that allows for differences, enforcement of policies is complicated. However, the ECC has demonstrated that when they so choose, they hold pastors and churches to specific behavioral expectations connected to declared aspects of the organization's identity. They owe it to women to make that same commitment to a 50-year-old policy that has been treated as optional for too long.

Though these initiatives would make a difference, without addressing the needed evolution in their organizational culture, women will still experience the frustrating path of the SGL in their pursuit of leadership. Listening, taking responsibility for harm, and offering better support are crucial steps the denomination must take that will help to change the organizational culture. The ACCW is a powerful resource in these efforts, but its work cannot be the only avenue for creating a more equal leadership experience. With intentional effort, the ECC can become a place where proclaimed organizational identity matches reality and where women no longer need to wonder if they are allowed to lead.

Allowed to Lead?

This study contributes to our understanding of the SGL for women in pastoral leadership in the ECC, shedding light on the toll it takes to hit barriers at every turn and offering insights to help ECC leadership match practice to policy and improve the leadership experience for women. The title of this dissertation "Allowed to Lead?," with a question mark, is an intentional framing of this study. In my early years with my campus ministry organization, Cru, I often heard "we *allow* women to lead here." In other words, because this organization is not a church, those who believe women should not lead in churches must accept female leadership here. As an interdenominational organization that partners with various churches, Cru adopts a "freedom to

disagree” approach very similar to the ECC, holding that denominations can keep women from leading, but Cru is not a church. Within the branch in which I work, practice can be different than policy since local leadership holds the power to deny or allow women’s leadership. Early in my ministry career, I watched a teammate experience severe discrimination due to her gender since other team members were personally opposed to her leadership. In this case and many others, “allow” meant nothing even when national policies said otherwise.

Though I do not hear women’s leadership openly talked about in these terms anymore, the framing has stuck with me and often still applies. In 2021, a woman was denied a speaking opportunity at a Cru campus meeting because a few student leaders were opposed to hearing from her since she was a pastor. Again, I saw that “allow” is subjective and only applies when it does not get too uncomfortable for those in power. In other words, allowing is fine if it does not disrupt the organization too much, make too many people angry, or impact the financial well-being of the ministry. A more recent personal experience illustrates this in a way that is relatable to my participants’ experiences in the ECC.

Within my ministry work, I partner with churches of varied denominations. As my husband and I prepared to visit one of our partnering churches, I opened an email from the pastor about details related to the upcoming visit and read the following.

I am wondering if Ryan would be willing to **preach** or do a 25-minute lesson from the Word during our Worship service? And in addition, I planned to give you and Ryan the Sunday school time which would be about 40 minutes **to share** about the ministry and how you’ve seen God at work over the last few years. (emphasis mine)

This request is not unusual and over the years, I have been frequently ignored or specifically told I should only share a ministry update. Because of our interdenominational

design, I have been trained to follow the preferences of the church that partners with us. In the past, my reply would have simply been, “thank you, that sounds great” and then I would deliver the bad news to my husband who hates public speaking. I knew that asking if I could preach instead carried the possibility of offending the pastor and others, and/or ending their financial support. But since I was in the middle of this research and this was an ECC church, I decided to ask. With some hesitation, I replied with the following:

Having the full Sunday school time for an update on the ministry sounds great! We appreciate that and will plan on bringing some sort of presentation (probably just slides) to share some photos. As far as helping with the service, we are happy to help! My giftings/passions are more aligned to speaking/teaching as I have my degrees in that and have been able to teach public speaking while doing my PhD over these last few years. Having me do the sermon or us doing it together would be our preference. Since we have attended ECC churches ourselves and I'm studying the denomination right now for the dissertation, we know that the denomination does ordain women but not every church has women preach. So, if that's an issue, Ryan can do it on his own. But I just thought I'd ask in case.

I was grateful for the reply that said, “I have had women preach for me in the past, so I am supportive of you preaching the word on your visit. Thank you.”

I share this story to contextualize the mental and emotional toll that the policy-practice gap takes on women. More than once, I have been relegated to “sharing” about the ministry while my husband is asked to preach. Never mind the fact that I have four years of experience teaching public speaking along with what will soon be three communication degrees. I have experienced many other moments of exclusion due to my gender in a Christian organization that,

like the ECC, “fully supports” women in leadership. This experience gave me a small glimpse of what my participants and all women in the ECC manage daily. Each time something happens that challenges their leadership, they face internal questions of what to say when, whether to push back or not, and if it is worth the risk of damaging their reputation or losing a position and their income. Similar concerns went through my head as I debated my email reply. The easiest response would have been to accept this opportunity with gratitude and lead within the lane that I am allowed.

Thus, the most significant contribution of this research is its witness to and demonstration of the toll taken on women in pastoral leadership—not in lower or no wages, slower promotions, under-utilized talents, and a weaker organization. These are injustices and failings that largely have been documented in the ECC and across society. Rather, this study contributes to scholarship and practice by giving voice to the personal loss suffered by women pastors in the ECC thanks to the practice-policy gap. These findings indicate the human cost for women in pastoral leadership. These are stories that they cannot tell. While the policy-practice gap means that women will suffer, the organization has no formal means for gathering and addressing these experiences. Beyond a broad recognition that problems exist, the pain and particularity for women is hidden, making their burden all the worse and reducing the chances that change will be made. This study documents this unique distress that women endure. Though they accept this suffering as part of their calling, ECC leadership and the entire organization cannot respond appropriately, ethically, or justly without truly understanding what this gap is doing to women pastors.

This contribution provides a glimpse into the price that women pay. They are told to deal with it, adjust, be patient, and through the ECC’s celebration of progress, there is an implicit

expectation to be grateful for the current state of affairs, especially in relation to the past. Within the ECC, they celebrate 50 years of progress. Everyone is directed to see through direct communication and through upbeat messaging on websites and other resources this success. There is an acknowledgement of how bad it used to be or how we are not there yet, conveying that patience is still needed but gratitude is expected. This narrative of progress makes it more difficult to speak up for change. While ECC leadership is given the benefit of the doubt for problems that remain, women are left to sustain the impact of actions large and small that restrict their leadership. In addition, hope wanes as misogynist patterns are allowed to continue even when recognized by leadership as wrong and detrimental.

In the meantime, women persevere because the character needed to pursue work where they are not fully accepted includes a willingness to set aside one's own needs and prioritize others. This weight is invisible in settings where "allowance" is supposedly clear, but leads to discouragement, burnout, mental health struggles, and/or leaving the ECC or the ministry entirely. Their stories remain untold unless someone asks. Worse, sometimes when they are expressed in a setting such as the annual ACCW luncheon, they are dismissed as unfortunate but expected incidents. A hand pat or even an "I'm sorry this is the reality" without any accountability for churches that fail to uphold ECC policies is painful. Discrimination always harms and can cut deeper when sanctioned (directly or indirectly) by leaders who claim equality.

The women I interviewed are faithful to a higher calling and many embrace the ECC in its strengths and faults. The emotional maturity required to work in a place with conflicting messages is admirable. But their sacrifices cost them time and energy, and allowing these injustices to continue also deprives congregants from a richer picture of life and Christianity. The ECC proclaims,

the fact that both men and women were created in God's image is particularly significant.

God's plan for community and unity was based on the equality of the human beings God had created and on their equal participation and full partnership. (Mann, 2004, p. 6)

In a space where questions about their leadership could be directly addressed by pointing to such clear and supportive statements of theology, instead women are overlooked, undervalued, and ignored. Discrimination can be excused as "differing views" and when those differing views are attacking one's identity, they take a toll.

Women will continue to persevere, to accept challenges, and remain faithful to their work. ECC leadership could lighten their load and create a new reality for women in pastoral leadership present and future. There are steps that can be taken to lessen this emotional and mental toll and the impact of the SGL, but it will take intentionality and effort by leadership to implement changes that will reshape their organizational culture in a lasting way. Specifically, I see three elements that would help on a larger structural level, accountability, education, and representation. In addition, there are three areas where ECC leadership can address conflicts through interpersonal communication and relationships, including prioritizing listening, taking responsibility for the pain and damage that has been done, and improving support.

Direction for the ECC

Accountability, Education, and Representation

The design structure of the ECC lends itself to autonomous leadership that when left unchecked, can result in environments that are unhealthy for women. ECC leaders are aware of pastors and regional leadership that undermine church policy and efforts should be made to address these behaviors. Since substantial power is held at the local level, without directly addressing this misalignment, misogyny will continue to flourish. It is well past time for ECC

leadership to hold all pastors and all levels of leadership accountable to support women. This must begin with pastors within the ECC and with churches that are known to be in opposition. Direct communication should occur to determine congregational fit within the denomination and appropriate steps for education or removal should follow. To show their dedication to the success of women in pastoral leadership, the ECC should institute a safe and easy way for women to report difficulties. Beyond gathering this information and providing support for the women, this system should also initiate a process to address the individual or church involved. The denomination needs to put the well-being of the women who work for them above the preferences of a pastor and church that disagrees with a core identity piece of the organization, especially when those preferences are at odds with the ECC.

Within churches that have pastoral staff who are supportive of women, there are often still congregants who are not. The ACCW has discussed ideas such as a survey that a pastor could distribute to their church to assess where congregants stand with women's leadership. Using this as a starting point, other tools are planned that could help educate church members before a woman is placed there. Sometimes assumptions about a church's readiness for a woman in leadership has kept ECC leadership from further investigating the reality before a woman arrived. A survey beforehand could help leadership prepare the church for this change. If it is known that some congregants oppose women in leadership, some suggested a mentoring approach to help people adjust their views.

You can't force someone to change their beliefs. That's really, really inappropriate. And in the same way I saw that in my own church where we told Joe, the guy that would walk out (when she preached), "you are welcome to worship here." I never said that directly to him. He wouldn't have heard that from me. But I said this in a meeting with the men

leaders of the church. And then they finished my sentence and said, “but don't expect us to not let you preach.” And I'm like, yes, that's exactly . . . and then he eventually did change. And so even though he wasn't willing to be disciplined, we actually brought that to him and said, “we want to walk you through this process and really explain why we believe Pastor Z should be able to do this, not just her, but leader women in general.” He was not interested (initially), but can we do that more? You know, can we have more intentional conversations? (Pastor Z)

Standardizing the use of available educational resources would create more consistency at the local level and increase opportunities for employment for women. It should be noted that though congregants should be free to hold varied views, pastors should require those on ECC leadership teams to be supportive of the denomination's identity as a place for women's leadership. It is safe to assume that most churches would not have someone on their leadership team who was an atheist. They would welcome that person in the pews but their lack of commitment to the core value of a belief in God would exclude them from leading the congregation. These same criteria should be applied on behalf of women in leadership.

No participants pretended that this is an easy topic with simple solutions. However, there are some clear steps that the ECC can take to show their full support and to facilitate growth in churches where congregants are not yet in agreement. The ECC has had instruction on this topic for decades and participants discussed how to improve the content and accessibility. Several resources are listed on the ACCW's site and possible next steps could include standardizing the use of these tools to better align churches to equal leadership for women.

Additionally, using the Justice Continuum developed by Rev. Devyn Chambers Johnson (2020) could help leadership evaluate congregants and move people forward. As previously

described, this framework places people on a continuum when considering any justice issue, from tolerate to ally to advocate to make room. The Justice Continuum provides a tangible way for the ECC to face reality and move past policies and good intentions. This tool, along with other education, could help male pastors grow in awareness and learn how to make space. The ECC would be wise to listen to the suggestions from women, who see the need for ECC leadership to address the role of men in changing the culture.

Another key to addressing inequality and helping congregants grow in acceptance is to continue to improve representation of women at all levels of the organization. This can serve as another means of educating church members. Participants agree that congregants should be allowed to hold varied views and many of them discussed how important it is to have women leading. They noted how frequently minds are changed by knowing women personally. As people grow in their respect of individual women that they know, this often leads to a shift in their thinking and to acceptance of women's leadership. Interviewees were clear that there need not be a screening process for parishioners that would only allow those in favor of women to cross the threshold of the church. These women will continue to extend grace, kindness, and patience with those who attack, malign and doubt them and they recognize this as part of their calling.

Representation serves the entirety of the church as it increases the likelihood that young women can see the pastorate as a possibility and young men grow up in an environment where women's leadership is affirmed. Many study participants had not initially considered a pastoral career, in part because they had never seen a woman in that role. This is the "danger of invisibility: it plants doubt where confidence should grow" (Jakavula, 2025, p. 37). The lack of representation is a gap that keeps young girls from recognizing in themselves any desire to

pursue pastoral work. While young men are frequently offered opportunities in churches to preach or lead, building their confidence and experience in a way that can solidify a calling, young women lack a similar endorsement. While in seminary, opportunities for leadership continue to build for men while women are limited, and women are in a place of playing catch-up as they are just beginning to realize their giftings (Lauve-Moon, 2021). Increasing the number of women in leadership positions can lead to more women joining a company and fewer deciding to leave, as well as decreasing the gender pay gap (Ceni et al., 2025). The added benefit of normalizing the leadership of women for all is key to shaping the future reality for women.

March 2026 offered an opportunity to see the fruit of representation with the ACCW's aforementioned initiative "March into Those Pulpits." Calling for "our pastors, men and women alike, to prayerfully consider inviting a woman to preach in your church during one or more of those March Sundays" (ACCW, *What we do*, n.d., initiative information accessed March 1, 2026). Launched during Women's History Month, it goes on to explain that this pursuit is "rooted in our Covenant commitment to be faithful to the whole of Scripture, this initiative reflects our denominational understanding that God calls and equips women and men alike to preach the gospel." (ACCW, *What we do*, n.d., initiative information accessed March 1, 2026). This tangible way to increase representation builds on momentum of the Four More initiative. ECC leadership can show a stronger endorsement of initiatives like this, signaling their agreement with these aims.

These steps would help to bring consistency and lessen the policy-practice gap for women. However, the organizational culture will only be shifted if other actions are concurrently taken. Concrete steps to align practices with policies include the following: the ECC must listen, take responsibility for past and current obstacles, and improve support for women. Additionally,

the ACCW is an incredible asset to the denomination and by continuing their work the unit can help in these endeavors as well. However, I caution ECC leadership to not put the responsibility for a culture shift on those who serve in the ACCW, most of whom are women managing the demands of pastoral leadership themselves. Below, I further explain my recommendations in each of these areas.

The Power of Listening

Of the 45 women contacted about participation in this study, 38 responded quickly and were willing to be interviewed. The eagerness to participate was due in part to their willingness to serve others but it also points to a strong, shared sense of shortcomings within the ECC. Women have stories to tell, experiences to offer, and important feedback for leadership and this study offered them a chance be heard. Organizational culture and practices can be discriminatory through conscious and unconscious bias, making it crucial for leadership to give women a platform to talk about their experiences (Maheshwari & Lenka, 2022). This endorsement of a commitment to equality is needed since establishing gender diversity requires more than a “one size fits all approach” (Maheshwari & Lenka, 2022, p. 390).

Lauve-Moon (2021) recommends “prioritizing listening as part of organizational culture” and this is crucial for those who are not aware of the gender structure that is creating obstacles for women (p. 196). Gender structure as a social construct shapes the roles and expectations for both women and men (Lauve-Moon, 2021). Many challenges that women face are created or aided by underlying and unrecognized gender bias. Truly listening, with an intent to improve opportunities for women, requires humility and an openness to learning where gender structures are inequitable. This openness is necessary since gender structure is continually evolving and this value is vital for churches who want to see lasting change (Lauve-Moon, 2021). It should be

noted that these structures can be detrimental to men as well. Expectations for men to pursue positions of power and financial gain can deter them from moving into pastoral careers. Similarly, men can be pressured to withhold emotions due to dominant portrayals of masculinity (Lauve-Moon, 2021). These two examples illustrate the destructive impact of underlying expectations and gender constructs on everyone. The ECC must decide how committed is the denomination to the equal treatment of women and men and if the church's self-proclamation as a place where women lead is aspiration or reality. This is crucial for the sake of women in pastoral leadership, current and future leaders of both genders, and congregations that deserve to see a healthier and more equitable church (Lauve-Moon, 2021).

For some ECC leadership, it is acceptable to discourage a woman's job application because that church will only consider male applicants, condescending hand pat included. Whether this is from a superintendent who dislikes this reality not, leaders need to consider the impact of this interaction on women and the implications for the ECC as an organization. Every time a hand pat asks everyone to look the other way and for women to apply somewhere else, deliberate discrimination is allowed to flourish.

As previously noted, ECC pastor Rev. Dr. Devyn Chambers Johnson investigated what could be done to remove obstacles for women within the ECC. She emphasized the need for leadership to listen to women since they are the ones who can answer the questions about the discrepancies between the ECC's identity as an egalitarian space and its local churches restricting women's leadership. Chambers Johnson (2020) summarizes the point thusly:

women clergy are the ones best equipped to name, address, and challenge the discrepancy between the espoused egalitarian values of the Evangelical Covenant Church and the reality. Yet historically women clergy in the ECC have had a marginal voice—always

working on the fringes hoping for change. When their voice or opinion has been sought it has been as a supplement or counter point to the dominant male voice and position. Women have never been tasked in addressing the challenge AND given the power, position, and resources for implementation. The Evangelical Covenant Church must listen to clergywomen and let them lead. (p. 12)

She goes on to explain the importance for “white women need to take more seriously the call to listen to our colleagues of color. Clearly issues of power are pervasive and oppressed groups are quite capable of oppressing others in their own pursuit of equality” (2020, p. 22). Listening to those who are experiencing discrimination gives them agency and affirms leadership’s willingness to admit fault and pursue change. Hearing the stories is the first step that must be followed by owning the past damage and present hardships that women in pastoral leadership endure within the ECC.

Taking Responsibility

The ECC must admit that damage has been done and that numerous missteps have not only failed to adequately address the stained-glass labyrinth but have undermined confidence, contributed to mental health struggles, and caused heartbreak among the women they proclaim to love and support. Women have been labeled the problem, as one participant in the early years of ordination explained.

There was no road for a woman unless you made it for yourself. We did so at risk to (our) reputation most of the time. They rebranded you like they did me, as troublemaking, you know, non-conforming, not following the rules. (Pastor X)

Each student serves in an internship as they approach graduation. Pastor X’s first experiences at her internship are not stories that the ECC will tell as they celebrate the 50th

anniversary, but it is crucial that they are addressed. After initial outcry from the church on her placement there, the male lead pastor advocated for her and informed the congregation that they would need to accept her leadership or go somewhere else. She shares this heartbreaking story of what happened in her time there.

And so rather than go somewhere else, here's what they did. I'll never forget. So, the first communion Sunday where I was given the opportunity to help serve communion. You know keeping in mind this is a congregation of 350 people, we had one pastor on one side of the church and one on the other. People would come in line and go to either one. And so when I got up to serve communion you know, more than 300 people got in line to receive communion from the male pastor and maybe four people got in line to receive communion from me. And they wouldn't let me preach and wouldn't let me preach and wouldn't let me preach. And it was a huge war, and it was very depressing. And I struggled deeply with depression. I just sometimes thought I just couldn't go on. And then finally said, okay, she can preach. But on the Sunday when I preached, as I got up to read the gospel text from which I was preaching that Sunday [paused, getting emotional]. This is hard for me to talk about. Sorry. I would say more than 200-some-odd people stood up and walked out. There may be 100 people, or not quite 100 people stayed for the sermon.

(Pastor X)

Numerous stories like this were told by participants and it is vital for the ECC to own their role in the grief and pain that women have had to endure. The dismissal of a motion to educate and train churches was not just a vote in a meeting, but a deliberate choice to throw women into scenarios that were toxic and destructive, sacrificing their mental health and

emotional states. Chambers Johnson (2020) calls for the ECC to recognize this pain and own their part in it, rather than dismissing the damage that has been done.

We have crafted a narrative that negates the struggles of female clergy by downplaying or overlooking their voices. We have sung our praises as being an evangelical denomination that ordains women without acknowledging that we have done very little to support these women we so graciously ordained. There is a lack of acknowledgement that women have experienced pain at the hands of the ECC and often the efforts of women to express that pain backfires. Rather than having their stories embraced they are deemed troublesome. Because their stories make others uncomfortable, they are seen as difficult to work with or unable to be a team-player. Conversely, women are implicitly expected to remain silent regarding their stories of pain in order to be employable within the Evangelical Covenant Church. (p. 84)

Addressing gender pay gaps, Xiong et al. (2025) found that the “informal cultural foundations” of a company are key (p. 18). Policies can help but their long-term impact hinges on how much underlying norms evolve with the changes. The sincerity of a company’s commitment to equality is seen in the depth of their support and how well they consider the larger cultural patterns at work. The ECC must own damage of the past, the oppression of the present, and the reality of what the future will be if they remain stagnant.

Improve Support

Marginalized groups need extra support to manage the microaggressions, discrimination, and the added work it takes to exist as a minority. For participants, that comes from personal relationships from within and from outside of the ECC, and organized groups within the denomination. Some regions were celebrated for their opportunities for connection and support

for women, while others were described as areas to avoid. Mentorship is important and many women talked about the necessity of a strong support base to stay in the ministry. Cohort groups and regional gatherings were mentioned as safe spaces that held tremendous value for participants. Study results align with what researchers have discovered, support from superiors and colleagues is vital to the success of women in the ECC. These relationships can offer room to process challenges that could easily go unspoken, such as incidents that are brushed off as unintentional or seem too small to report to leadership.

The “Bermuda Triangle of Professional Relationship Development” (see Figure 5.1) is a helpful framework for considering the types of support that would be beneficial for women within the ECC (Olsen & LaGree, 2023, p. 931). Advocacy, opportunities for “high profile work,” and role-modeling are crucial for women in their first five years of their careers (Olsen & LaGree, 2023, p. 931). This intersection is defined as the Bermuda triangle since these aspects were unknown and offer key insights to addressing the gender pay gap in the creative communication field (Olsen & LaGree, 2023). Early career women reported the importance of professional relationships in the quality of their work environment and in influencing opportunities for advancement.

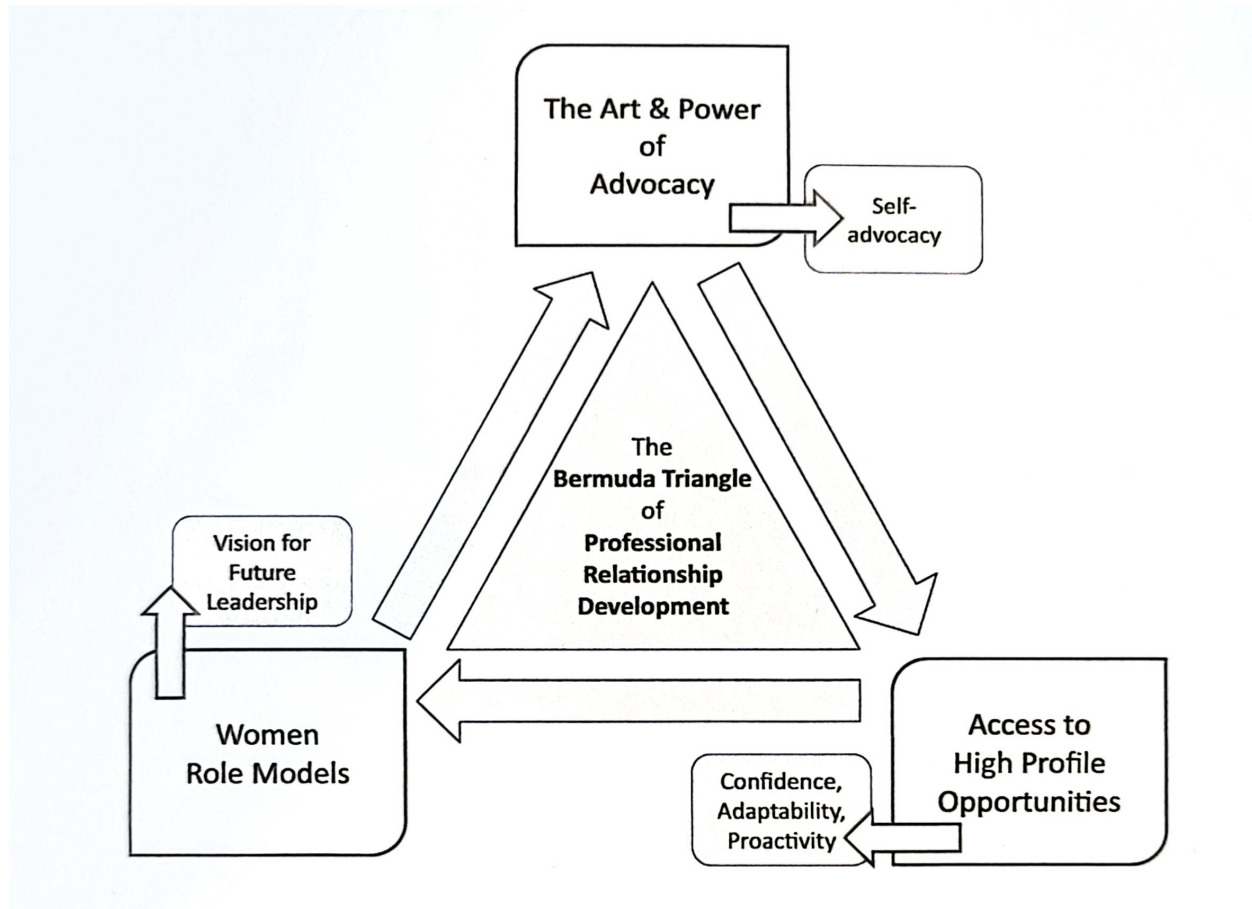


Figure 5.1. The Bermuda Triangle of Professional Relationship Development (Olsen & LaGree, 2023, p. 931)

The ECC offers a similar dynamic as an organization in which historically men are more easily set up for success, and this framework should serve as a guideline for the organization. As discussed in chapter four, participants talked about the importance of mentoring relationships, both formal and informal, as well as the impact of seeing older women be successful in their pastoral work. Establishing consistent mentoring across the denomination while also educating employees on what is required to enhance that support could help grow opportunities for women now and build momentum for more leadership advancement in the future. This support must be intentional and specific to the experience of new employees (Olsen & LaGree, 2023). The organic nature of many of these relationships points to the strong influence that interpersonal

connections can have on an employee's well-being. Within the ECC, these relationships often coincide with having an advocate and receiving opportunities for more high-profile work, such as preaching.

Support structures and education are crucial but are not the only answer to create change within the organization. These tools should be seen as help for those bearing the weight of inequality and discrimination, but organizations should not view leadership training and mentorship as the only ingredients to changing women's experiences (Chambers Johnson, 2020). The problem within the ECC is not that women must be better equipped or more educated, and too much focus on such programs meant to equip or change women can be detrimental to them (Chambers Johnson, 2020). Rather, lasting change requires also looking closely at the organizational culture and asking difficult questions about why problems remain after 50 years of proclaimed equality.

Listening to women's experiences and taking responsibility for both past and current damage are crucial steps for the ECC to take to improve the leadership experience of women. As they make efforts to provide more support, they must also address the underlying problems of their organizational culture. The inconsistency between local churches and the policies endorsing women at all levels of leadership must be addressed. This change does not require creation or adoption of new policies, or extensive deliberation by leadership to weigh the pros and cons of such policies. It requires only a commitment to consistency in aligning policy and practice, resulting in better care for all employees.

Direction for ACCW

The challenges that women face and missteps by ECC leadership are why the ACCW is needed. Its existence was regarded by most participants as a sign that the denomination wants

equality and justice for women in pastoral leadership. Yet clarity on the specifics of what the organization does is needed. Two key areas that deserve attention are raising awareness of what they do and improving long-used resources.

As discussed, the five missional priorities of the ACCW are advocacy, education and empowerment, fellowship, celebration, and resources (ACCW, What we do, n.d.). Participants were unclear on what is involved with its advocacy and most familiar with the lunch that the ACCW hosts for fellowship at the denomination's annual meeting. Creating or better utilizing existing resources could benefit the ACCW and help its leaders make their work known, including their website and/or other forms of communication used to promote the group. ECC leadership should provide avenues to showcase and support the ACCW, as they did at the 2026 annual conference. The group was highlighted at the session celebrating the 50th year of women's ordination. This is just one example of how the ECC could show their agreement and support of the ACCW, thereby strengthening the work of the advocacy group with this denominational endorsement.

Updating or replacing resources for educating congregations is a practical way for the ACCW to help change the organizational culture. Participants were familiar with older tools such as the *Called and Gifted* pamphlet from 2004 that is a "reaffirmation of the biblical basis for the full participation of women in the ministries" (Mann, 2004, p. 1). Feedback on this resource varied, though most saw value or have benefited from its use. Evaluating the wording and clarity in this resource and others is an important first step to having strong and accessible tools that are available to all churches. Creating a new tool was mentioned by one participant who would love to see this information in a format that is easier for congregants to digest, such as a video series that could be done over time. The ACCW could also pursue recommendations for the

standardization of these tools, with the goal of assuring that all ECC churches will “understand and accurately represent our position and practice related to women in leadership to their constituency” (Mann, 2004, p. 19).

The ACCW serves a crucial role and is a key voice for equality, though the responsibility of fixing all that is wrong should not be their burden to bear. As has been mentioned, the ACCW is made up of pastors who are already working long hours in their roles and faithfully serving their congregations. They are giving their time and energy to also lead within the ACCW. ECC leaders have an incredible resource in this organization, and they owe it to those involved to step in and carry more of the weight for the culture change that is needed.

Future Research

Many opportunities for further investigation exist. Research should continue to investigate the compounding challenges of intersectionality. In a predominantly white organization, women of color face additional barriers in leadership and it is vital to consider intersectionality and focus on groups who are marginalized in more than one way (Phillips & Ranganathan, 2025). My study provides additional information for the ECC and other organizations since research shows that similar patterns exist across career fields. Women of color need more opportunities to tell their stories and participate in change efforts. Future analysis should focus on providing avenues for women of color to be heard and their obstacles addressed.

Participants shared many suggestions for improvement. Next steps for the ECC should include asking women directly what will best support them. Action research would be an effective way to pursue this, and Rev. Dr. Chambers Johnson’s work could serve as model and catalyst.

Movements within Christian culture should be investigated alongside these challenges, such as Christian nationalism and tradwife influencers. Growing since the mid-2000s, “tradwife” is a shortened term of “traditional wife.” This movement is fueled by social media influencers (Jarry & Perliger, 2025, para. 2). Though often masked in cooking or decorating videos, the underlying values of the tradwife movement are a different type of misogyny, claiming to help women to achieve their true calling as wives and mothers (Jarry & Perliger, 2025). The current socio-political and religious climate shapes congregants and their expectations. The tradwife movement is just one example that demonstrates the need for a broader look at cultural, political, and religious trends.

Underlying gender bias is destructive and often hidden, but experiences of marginalized groups can reveal structural issues that need addressing. Oppression in an organization that claims inclusion can be difficult to see for those in power, and some deliberately choose to look the other way. Future work would benefit from a mixed-methods approach to discover generalizable findings and uncover the unique experiences of marginalized groups.

Conclusion

There is much to consider as we look to remove the SGL in the ECC. This investigation into differences between policy and practice gives insight into the barriers that continue to keep women from leading within the denomination. These findings can not only help the ECC but also other entities that want to encourage more equity and inclusion for women and any excluded groups. Research shows that similar dynamics are seen within many career fields and in the broader culture. All organizations would benefit from making efforts at all organizational levels to hold misaligned leaders accountable, educate employees and members, and increase representation of women and other marginalized groups. Listening to marginalized people,

accepting responsibility for harm, and supporting those who are struggling would improve employee's experiences and help to make necessary changes to their organizational culture. These basic principles provide a framework that would help make any company be a more just place.

Whether organizational leaders blame it on a design issue, dismiss it as a commitment to "freedom to disagree," or attempt to humbly recognize "that we're not quite there," the reality for women in the ECC does not match the claimed identity of the organization as a place for women to serve in all levels of leadership. The ECC knows that there are challenges and have heard from their own pastors that problems exist. Research in addition to this study reveals systemic problems and organizational culture that prioritizes male leadership. The panel at their most recent annual gathering celebrating the 50th anniversary of women's ordination simultaneously acknowledged the historical problems and issues that still exist. The most recent study, completed each decade since 1976, affirms that problems continue for women.

In discussing the work of Dr. Parker J. Palmer, Wooten (2023) reminds us that impactful leadership involves acknowledging the gap between "reality and possibility" (Wooten, 2023, p. 113). For women in pastoral leadership in the ECC, the discontinuity between policy and practice illustrates this gap. Palmer, a Quaker writer and activist, wrote of the strain of living in "the tragic gap," the challenge of accepting that reality and what could and should be do not match (Wooten, 2023, p. 114). To embrace this tension means "to stand in the tragic gap, the gap between the difficult realities facing humanity and a hope grounded in possibility" (Wooten, 2023, p. 114). Hope is central to being able to stand in this gap yet can be difficult to find and hold on to. If not diligent, leaders can fall into either cynicism or idealism, two sides of avoidance and a refusal to stand in the gap (Wooten, 2023).

In the women I interviewed, I saw resilience and a commitment to their calling, often resulting in hope for promising change ahead. The question for ECC leaders is are they willing to also stand in that gap, recognizing and fully owning the mismatch between their claimed identity and the reality for women in the ECC? Will they do their part to try to move toward congruency in identity and reality? Hope comes from lived experiences, moments where leaders can see positive movement. As Wooten (2023) explains,

leaders who stand in the tragic gap during war can rely on glimpses of peace they have known. Activists in the work of racial equity have caught glimpses of justice. Hospice professionals in the midst of death and dying see glimpses of life. In this way, what is possible is not some kind of fantastical dream, but a reality that has been witnessed and that can return more fully someday if we have the courage to stand in the tragic gap. (p. 115)

Many of my interviewees are doing well in their settings, managing the obstacles and making their way through the SGL. They stay in this tension between the differences because they live it constantly and many of them do so with hope. ECC leadership could choose an idealistic approach, believing that it is enough to have the policies in place and refusing to hold all ECC churches accountable to supporting women. Or they can choose to stand in the gap alongside women, to recognize the differences, and to do more to decrease the gap. Taking steps to match policy and practice, and to care for employees by listening and offering more support will help change the organizational culture. Any combination of the aforementioned recommendations would give women a glimpse into what could be, increasing their hope of fewer obstacles in the future, and strengthening the denomination.

It is time for the ECC to stop dismissing the stories of women, condoning the actions of misaligned pastors and churches, and patting hands in their dismissal of women's leadership goals. This is not only a matter of aligning policy with practice but is an ethical issue of caring for all who work within the ECC. Despite 50 years of women's ordination, women's experiences reveal there has been substantial harm and looking the other way is no longer an option. As one participant graciously explained the argument of giving churches time to adjust "okay, we'll give you a 50-year window. But at some point, we have to say this is how it is." The ECC could embrace this milestone as another decision point in this too-long journey towards equality. Their response to the current state will reveal their level of commitment to the women that they claim to affirm.

To get to a day when women can lead in all roles in all churches with support at every level, there is crucial and difficult work to do. But how important it is to change the reality so that women know without a doubt that they are needed, valued, and significant to the future of the ECC. As Pastor O shared, "that dynamic of being a part of a denomination where you know that not everybody sees you as somebody who is called or fit for ministry poses a challenge and a struggle in and of itself, right?" Whether women are allowed to lead is a question that should not need to be asked. Allowance is based on a power structure that is not supposed to exist. When policies proclaim equality, there should be no need for allowance.

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Appendix A - Recruitment Protocol

Email Sent to Personal Connections (Male Pastor):

Hi Pastor _____

I hope this finds you doing well! I really appreciated your enthusiasm and support for my research when we met in May! Over the course of last summer and then this past semester, my dissertation kept evolving and I did end up landing on a study focused on Evangelical Covenant pastors who are women. I appreciated the contacts you had shared before and wanted to see if you could share their full names too? You may have shared that when we met up but I wasn't sure where I might have those written down.

If you know of any others that you think would be interested, could you send me their contact info as well? With the way I designed the study, I'm trying to complete about 30 interviews with women who are currently serving or have served as pastors in the ECC. I have contact info for 3 others in addition to the ones you sent above, so any and all help is appreciated!

Thank you!

Email Sent to Referrals from Others:

Title: Hello and a question, Pastor _____ gave me your contact info :)

Hi Rev. _____,

My name is Monica Reeves, and I am a PhD student at Kansas State University, studying Leadership Communication. I'm hoping to connect with you about a research project I'm working on for my dissertation related to the Evangelical Covenant Church. I am emailing to share more about this work and to see if you would be willing to be part of this project. Rev. _____ suggested that I reach out to you.

First, here is a little more background and context. I've been with Cru since 2001 in the campus ministry, but I shifted to part-time in 2022 to focus on getting my PhD. This program is interdisciplinary, and I've been able to study women in ministry leadership through my courses. That has led me to this dissertation focus, studying women in pastoral leadership. For a few reasons, I've chosen to study women within the ECC specifically.

I am interested in addressing the leadership challenges that women in pastoral leadership encounter, as well as the resources that help them succeed. The purpose of my research is to gain insight from women in the pastoral field, specifically in the ECC, to better understand their personal experiences and to investigate the effectiveness of the Advocates for Covenant Clergy

Women and the Commission on Biblical Gender Equality. I'm interviewing ECC pastors, both past and present, to pursue these aims.

The goal for this work is to provide feedback to the ECC and other denominations so that women will be better supported, and obstacles can be removed that hinder their leadership advancement.

Would you be interested in participating in a 45-60 minute interview over Zoom? I can work with your schedule to find a time that's convenient for you. While I will know your identifying information (name, place of employment, etc.) this identifying information will not be reported in the research results to keep your identity confidential. This is a voluntary study, meaning you will be able to withdraw participation at any time without any consequences. You also have the right to refuse to answer any specific question.

I look forward to hearing from you and I'm happy to answer any questions you have about this study, or anything related to my work too!

Thanks!

Reminder Email, Sent if No Initial Response:

Hello Pastor _____,

I hope you are having a great start to your week! I just wanted to bring this to the top of your inbox again. I'm sure you have a full schedule and may not have availability for this. But I'd love to be able to talk with you for my research if you do have time! Let me know if you'd like to be a part of it! If outlook doesn't include the original email, I've copied it below here too.

Thank you!

Email Used for Those Posting an Announcement Online to Help Me Recruit:

Hi _____

Thanks also for your willingness to share about this study with others. Here is a summary you could share in that FB group or with others you think of. Feel free to add a line if you're willing for people to contact you, though just sharing my email works for me too.

Monica Reeves is a PhD student at Kansas State University. For her dissertation, she is working on a study that is focused on the leadership challenges that women in pastoral leadership encounter, as well as the resources that help them succeed. The purpose of this research is to gain insight from women in the pastoral field, specifically in the ECC, to better understand their personal experiences and to investigate the effectiveness of the Advocates for Covenant Clergy Women and the Commission on Biblical Gender Equity. She is interviewing ECC pastors, both past and present, to pursue these aims.

The goal for this work is to provide feedback to the ECC and other denominations so that women will be better supported, and obstacles can be removed that hinder their leadership advancement.

If you are interested in participating in a 45-60 minute interview over Zoom, you can email her directly at mlreeves@ksu.edu. She will work with your schedule to find a time that's convenient for you. While she will know your identifying information (name, places of employment, etc.) this identifying information will not be reported in the research results to keep your identity confidential. This is a voluntary study, meaning you will be able to withdraw participation at any time without any consequences. You also have the right to refuse to answer any specific question. If you're interested in participating, please email her at mlreeves@ksu.edu.

If you have any questions or additional thoughts at any point, please don't hesitate to reach out!
Have a great weekend and thank you again!

Thank-you Email Sent After Interview:

Hi _____

Thank you so much for taking time to talk with me! I really enjoyed our conversation and am grateful for your willingness to share openly about your experiences. If you have any questions or additional thoughts at any point, please don't hesitate to reach out!

Have a great weekend and thank you again!

Appendix B - Interview Structure and Questions

Introduction

Greeting

Thank them for participating

Confirm that informed consent was received

Small talk

Confirm that recording of the call is approved

Start recording and click on transcript

Explain that transcript and recording of the call will be saved. All content will only be accessible to me and my faculty advisor Dr. Colene Lind, listed on the Informed Consent form.

Thank you again for your time today! As you read in my email,

the **purpose** of this research is:

- to address the leadership challenges that women in pastoral leadership encounter,
- as well as investigate the resources that help them succeed.
- I hope to gain insight from women in the pastoral field, specifically in the Evangelical Covenant Church,
- to better understand their personal experiences and to investigate the effectiveness of the Advocates for Covenant Clergy Women (ACCW) and the Commission on Biblical Gender Equality (CBGE).

Goal of helping ECC and other denominations, so that women are better supported in their leadership.

My interest in this subject

- started with my own experiences in ministry and
- from observations I started to make on women leading in other ministry spaces.
- When I started this degree, this was a logical place to start, and I discovered that a lot of great research is being done
 - **on what scholars refer to as the “stained-glass ceiling”**

Why ECC

- I ended up focusing on the ECC since I have attended two ECC churches and
- then I discovered these support groups that I’m curious about.
- Explain how this fits well within the Leadership Communication program and community-engaged research

Transition into Interview

Encourage you to reflect on those experiences--both good and bad--that impacted your professional growth and leadership development.

Please feel comfortable being open and honest with your responses as your identity will be protected.

Do you have any questions before we get started?

Background Information

1. How long have you been or were you with the ECC?
2. How many churches have you served in and in what role? (Role examples include senior pastor, associate pastor, children's pastor, etc.)

Personal and Leadership Experience

3. Do you believe that being a woman in pastoral leadership in the ECC is a different experience than men in pastoral leadership? If so, in what ways?
 - a. **Follow-up**
Did/do you have similar opportunities for leadership experiences as any male pastors in your church? (Possible examples include preaching frequency, leading team meetings, representing the church's voice to congregants for formal statements).
 - b. Do you feel that you had/have the same opportunities as male pastors to ascend to higher levels of leadership?
 - c. Are there positions or opportunities not available to you due to your gender?
4. Did/do you feel supported in your leadership, by other staff members, and by your congregation? If so, in what ways? If not, how did that show up?
5. How do/did the expectations of others impact your work in the church, if at all?

I mentioned the leadership experiences, and I have some specific questions about those kinds of events.

6. Please describe your experience in team meetings. I'd love to hear about the overall feel, including things such as how much you enjoy them, if you struggle with being heard or if you have ample opportunities to present your thoughts, if your opinions are valued when you speak, or anything else you'd like to share.
7. Can you tell me about a time when you were critiqued for something related to your gender? Examples include your appearance (hairstyle, weight, dress), your role as a mom or non-mom, your communication (not feminine enough, too feminine).

If there is time, continue with these or other follow up questions.

8. Did/do you encounter other kinds of discrimination in any form due to your gender?
Follow-up: How did you handle these moments?
9. Did/does your church or ECC leadership have any protocol in place for helping you handle and address discrimination?
10. Did the ACCW or CBGE help you in any situations shared above?
11. Did other pastors, staff, or ECC leadership support you in these situations? If so, how?

Now I want to ask a few more questions about the Advocates for Covenant Clergy Women (ACCW) and the Commission on Biblical Gender Equality (CBGE). I'm still learning about these groups myself.

I see from their websites that the ECC offers support and resources to women in leadership, and to all congregations, through the ACCW and CBGE.

ACCW and CBGE⁹

12. What can you tell me about these organizations?
13. Have you benefited from support offered by these groups? (Examples could include mentoring, fellowship, advocacy, resources, or other).
14. Education is specifically mentioned, so have you seen any of their educational resources used with congregations?
15. Do you feel like the organizations are helping to make a difference when it comes to gender discrimination in the ECC?

Follow up: Are there ways that their support and resources could be better utilized? Why or why not?

Wrap-up

⁹ Initially I asked questions about both the ACCW and the Commission for Biblical Gender Equality but the interview process revealed that the CBGE no longer exists, so no attention is given to this organization within the chapters.

14. Is there anything else you would like to add?
15. If I have any additional questions or need clarification on your responses, it is okay for me to contact you again?
16. Can you think of any other women who may be willing to participate in this study?

Appendix C - Data Analysis Code Book

Category	Code	Definition	Criteria	Example
Differences for women			Includes: comparison to male in same role; specific critique or unique challenge based on gender; (overlaps with advantages for men)	
	Lack of job opportunities	Participant discusses challenges of getting a job, and/or the job they want rather than only one they can get (typically are in smaller congregations, rural, or non-lead roles), challenges with ECC to find calls, easier to get jobs in children's ministry	Include: first job is b/c of connections before seminary; can't get second job, having to go outside ECC	And so we have a lot of women. And the ACCW can give you like a pie chart statistic of how many people are ordained in the Covenant but serving outside of the Covenant because they couldn't find a job in the covenant.
		Participant discusses being talked to or about as a threat, not trusted	Include: rules unique to gender that imply women can't be trusted (Billy Graham rule), situations where their integrity or intentions are questioned	(On Billy Graham rule, men won't ride in a car with woman alone). And man, it was irritating. It was irritating. Because it felt like... I remember talking about it to the other women Like, are we so... Are we so dangerous? That we're going to get in the car and on a 15 minute car ride, we're going to I don't even, it was just, it was just, it was not our culture.
	Have to have more education and training, and no room for error	Women have to have all credentials possible, no room for error	Include: training, education required, also in relation to male colleagues having less education; any failure for women and they get no second chance, while men can come back from anything	He's not ordained. He's commissioned. He doesn't have a D-min. I don't know that he's finished any kind of actual degree in seminary. But he never felt the need for it. And because he didn't. He didn't need it because he got to do everything he wanted to do, well-funded, because of who he was. And part of that is because he was a guy, part of it definitely is because of just his personality and who he is. I feel like the women, I for sure was trying to just kind of go by the book and, you know. I'll get this degree, I'll get ordained um and try to do what I felt like I was called to do that way.

				When there were other people just kind of just kind of getting in there because, because they're winsome.
	Gender-based restrictions	Limited from advancement, opportunity due to gender	Include: limited on tasks like not allowed to preach or only preach when male pastor is gone; limited to children or youth and "allowable ministry"	And they have had a female on staff, but she's not a pastor. She's done the children's ministry.
	Gender-based expectations	Expectations around role and how they should serve as a woman; expectations on appearance, parenting, role as wife	Include: comments about weight, hair, appearance; comments about what is not appropriate for women in pastoral role; expectations about identity as wife or mom	My boss treats me like a housewife who works for fun. And I have to like keep reminding him that that's not my reality. I think, yeah, I think he makes assumptions about my motives sometimes. He's... I do think he actually, I do feel like he respects me. So I don't want to say that he doesn't respect me.
	Women have to ask questions men don't have to ask - is this b/c of my gender?	Doubts, questions about whether discrimination, not being hired, or difficult event is b/c of their gender	Include: situations described like questioning their calling; wondering if exclusion or lack of job is about gender;	So sometimes I wonder, can he say things and it's a little bit more well received from him than me and is that a gender thing or is that a personality thing like he's very like fun loving and extroverted. There are subtle ways sometimes where I wonder that, but then it's just like, I'm unsure of is that my own voice in the background, like my own baggage of like feeling like, is this because I'm a woman or is that it's hard to discern if it's my perception or reality. But I mean, likely to some degree. (ALSO IN DIFFS FOR WOMEN)
	Direct Discrimination	Participant talks about discrimination due to gender and/or ethnic identity	Include: comments, actions, incidents of direct discrimination	And then yeah, I mean, none of my male colleagues have ever had to sit across the table from people that you love in your own church who say they're leaving because they don't support women in that role. And none of them, you know, none of the men know what that feels like. That's a very, that's a very different dynamic than my male colleagues have to endure.
	Women have to spend energy helping male staff understand their experiences	Participant discusses time, energy it takes to help others understand	Include: educating colleagues, even those who are supportive	But one of the negative outcomes of the co-lead is the amount of thought energy that I put into helping my co-lead understand my perspective. Because he doesn't have to think about it. He's super teachable, super humble. This would never work if he wasn't. But it works because he's... he's trying to be an advocate. And he made the assumption . . . We've been working together. We're coming up on two years as co-leads. Coming in, he made the assumption that because we were co-lead candidates, the church was already really great

				with women in leadership. And I'm like, oh no. They're only great with it because they love me and you're my covering. And he's like, "oh."
	Women's statements ignored, men say same thing and is acknowledged	Participant mentions the overlooking of their comments in team meetings or other work settings	Include: any mention of this idea, same thing said by a male acknowledged after they have said it	you know, I'd say something and then five minutes later, the male lead pastor would say the same thing and it was like, that's a great idea. And (the other woman on the team) and I look at each other like, are you serious right now?
	Unique challenges for women of color	Participant discusses challenges, obstacles, discrimination related to being a person of color	Include: answers to direct questions about their reality, stories and incidents that they share discussing the differences they experience; discrimination	I'm walking into a Swedish denomination you know even though it's grown as far as churches of color, it's predominantly a white space that I get to be in you know. And nobody has ever been snotty or blatant. There have been contexts where I've been in where I've seen maybe hasn't been directly at me, but where I've seen some, oh, that's like blatant racism right there. So that is a real. That is a real thing, whether people want to acknowledge it or not. And I think the people who are really doing the work of anti-racism can acknowledge that. So to lead in those spaces, I think it's welcomed. But it's almost like what I have felt is, okay, here's the ceiling and you don't get to go any further. Nobody has said that, of course. Nobody would dare say that.
Advantages for men		Participant discusses differences and advantages that men have	Includes: comparison to women in same role; specific critique or unique challenge based on gender; (overlaps with differences for women)	
	Boys club	Participant talks about specific favoring of men and/or exclusion of women	Include: mention of "boys club," advantages for men due to gender, exclusion of women in settings they aren't invited to (golf course, etc.)	with the boys club at our church, we have a lot of generous people in the congregation who will give gifts to pastors. Now, in my seminary training. That was a no-no. It was like, you should not receive any gifts, which I really appreciated. But that happened. All the time. And there would be gifts like tickets to the professional sports teams, weekends at somebody's home. I mean, big, I mean, big things and I... I am not aware that, it may have been a few times with women there, but if it was, it wasn't very often. I sure never got anything like this. I wasn't looking for it.
	Male staff seen as main leaders no matter how	Mention of male leaders being treated, identified as main leader	Include: how congregants default to men, outsiders coming to church	there's been things that are no matter what, like they, key default is my male co-lead is looked to as head and lead pastor and that's almost never the case in terms of vision, direction, what we're doing

	roles are structured		assuming male is main leader	
Perception of ECC Leadership is positive		Participant discusses positive feelings, experiences with ECC leadership	Include: specific mentions of interpersonal interactions, public statements, conference speakers, policies that feel affirming or encouraging; leadership words and actions that are positive signs	
	Documents, policies, resources	Participant talks about resources available or policies that are helpful	Include: specific policies, their use of tools/resources, general knowledge of resources	so I know the Covenant has some good resources. I mean, we haven't gone through this process yet of establishing a board and kind of training them up and even members, but I know there are some materials that we will use about what the affirmations are.
	Positive comments from leadership (overlaps with comm. from leaders below)	Participant shares about specific interaction or broad communication from leadership that is positive, encouraging	Include: mentions of conversations, direct communication, comments from various levels of leadership in interpersonal, small group, large group settings; and public statements	President Tammy came and spoke to us as our last speaker. You know, and she came and talked to me directly like and said I hope you and others are going to create resources that we can use to navigate this political season to help our churches care for immigrants and refugees. You know, I don't know her well but like, well the fact that the denominational president was willing to talk to me. And affirm me to say what you bring to our denomination is valuable and needed right now. That meant a lot.
	Positive experience at North Park seminary	Participant discusses NP as positive experience with growth and encouragement of their leadership	Include: specific mention of professors, opportunities, classes, interactions of positive affirmation as well as NP professors and staff knowing things aren't perfect for women in the ECC and there are problems	Phenomenal women staff like just out of the world. I'm so grateful for them. They really like, they try so hard and I'm so grateful, so grateful. The men are great but like how impactful it is for me both that like the main history teacher and the main theology teacher (are women). And when I was there, like the person teaching ethics and still now, the person teaching pastoral care, like all of those are women. Like I just, there's something so beautiful about being shaped in that way, you know?
Perception of ECC leadership is negative		Participant shares about challenge, frustration, mistakes, difficulties with leadership decisions and actions	Include comments of frustration, disappointment, noting injustice, inconsistency	

	Inconsistency of how issues are handled: LGBTQ inclusion	Participant talks about inconsistency between how policies are enforced regarding LGBTQ+ inclusion	Include: personal experiences, stories of ECC more broadly	I would love to have known why in the world male pastors were not held accountable or at least I don't want to say held accountable. That's not very covenant, right? Like, but like you know, if we're going to excommunicate church because they affirm homosexuality, then why aren't we excommunicating churches that refuse to hire women?
	Inconsistency of how issues are handled: baptism	Participant talks about inconsistency between how policies are enforced regarding baptism	Include: personal experiences, stories of ECC more broadly	So baptism. So officially the Covenant embraces infant and believers baptisms and we're supposed to honor both but yet you can, again, I can't remember what the word is, but some sort of like conscious descent or something like that where you can embrace that God works both ways, but you won't be doing it or you don't believe in that.
	Depends on who is in charge	Participant references the differences between local churches and regions	Include: personal experiences, stories of ECC more broadly, references to variation in how policies are enforced, lack of accountability	What I do know, I don't know all the superintendents, but I do know that every conference is not equal.
	Lack of follow through or missteps	Participant references problems with follow through, lack of accountability, allowing pastors to stay who aren't aligned	Include: mention of vote in 1976 not passing to educate churches; lack of accountability for regions or churches, individual pastors; not following through, not doing enough	And the other thing, I don't know if you want to do a deep dive on this, but... I mean, in 1976 or whenever they voted to ordain women like they voted and all these people left the voting room to go out in the hallway and celebrate and high five. And the second vote was to educate our churches and it failed. And we voted the same year, I think, as the Methodists and the ELCA Lutherans to ordain women. And they voted to educate their people and look at how much further along they are.
Impressions of ACCW		Participant shares about ACCW knowledge or experience	Include: answers to direct questions, information they share in other answers regarding their own experience with ACCW or what they know or don't know	
	Perception of ACCW positive	Discussion of positive view of ACCW and their work	Include: personal experience, general knowledge of what they do, their existence in ECC	I really, I appreciated like the language that they're using around it is like it's almost as if, and this is what I've tried to use with others in trying to help them understand the need for the advocacy for women in ministry is that when I get the pushback from people of like - it's pushing women or whatever, and they feel like sometimes people feel like unfairly or whatever. And it's like their voices have been

				silenced for so long. They've been told they can't be in this space for so long. It's - everybody needs to be in ACCW. And when everybody is, then it won't be (needed) because then everybody will be equal so that's really the goal of ACCW is not just like this little side project of women, it's changing the culture to, wouldn't it be great when there is no need for advocacy for, because women are completely seen as equals. That's what we want to get to. It's not there yet. That's why it exists.
	Perception of ACCW negative	Participant discusses negative view, experiences	Include: personal experience, general knowledge of what they do, their existence in ECC; why they do not like it	I am not a member of ACCW. I've never wanted to be. Yeah, and this is where I'm like, you need to talk to some people that are members. To me and it's shifted in the last 18 years, but probably where I have not been as gracious is - I'm like, I don't want to be part of a group that's like. You know, "we do it all because the men can't hack it" and kind of almost male bashing. When I think that we need to work together with our male colleagues instead of bash them because they suck and they can't do as much as we can, you know, or they don't move out of the way so that way we have space. Yeah, I don't like that attitude. And I think most people would say, oh, that's not the attitude of ACCW, but I think it has been. And so I'm like, I don't want to be part of it.
Other Factors				
	Broader cultural concerns	Participant discusses broader realities with political landscape and/or within Christianity	Include: mentioning of trad wife movement, complementarianism, patriarchy; "bro culture" podcasts and other content; political influences	I'm more concerned culturally with like bro podcasts and like masculine whatever. I mean, I just feel like that's the big dog right now of like trying to battle some of this and a complementarian theology is just going to dovetail right in there with whatever people are ingesting.
	Role of power - ECC structure	Participant discusses structure of ECC and its role in environments for women	Include: mention of polity, structure, local level; both positive and negative	The problem is our polity. We're congregational polity church. And so each church gets to decide themselves and so that's what they're doing. I can't force everyone to... affirm women in all levels of leadership.
	Role of boards, leadership teams	Participant discusses leadership team role in personal experience or ECC more broadly	Include: references to leadership team, local church structure	It's just... it was this type of leadership that I was like. And we'd been talking about what it's like for women to lead, and we've been talking about women in church leadership stuff that you're probably writing about. And so it's just so fascinating for me to have two different people be like, oh, well, churches don't follow well if they've led themselves. And I was like, but churches are supposed to lead themselves. I

				always thought my call as a pastor was to join in with the church and lead with them. Right? Instead of.... Me leading top-down....
	Tenet of freedom in Christ	Participant discusses this tenet	Include: mention of specific tenet, ECC's commitment to "agree to disagree"; positive and negative	So I do struggle with because of the congregational polity of the denomination and churches having their own say with what the denomination considers to be non-essential. That's gray to me because to me, this is not a non-essential. This is a justice issue. And for me, some of the other things are non-essential. But I won't go there. I'll just say, let's be equal about it.
Sugg. for improvement				
	Accountability for pastors, churches	Participant discusses the need to hold churches and pastors accountable	Include: thoughts on inconsistency and how this is needed; lack of follow through with this issue; need for ECC to apply policies in a more standard way; and the challenges of this within the ECC structure	but holding the line on women leading. You can't force someone to change their beliefs. That's really, really inappropriate. And in the same way I saw that in my own church where we told the guy that would walk out. You are welcome to worship here. And I said those words like you are welcome to worship here. And I never said that directly to him. He wouldn't have heard that from me. But I said this in a meeting with the men leaders of the church. And then they finished my sentence and said, but don't expect us to not let you preach. And I'm like, yes, that's exactly what I... And then he eventually did change.
	Representation	Participant discusses the importance of representation in their own life, and the existence and/or the need for this in ECC	Include: personal stories of how this helped them, others; need for more; tokenism; for women and women of color specifically	(On her church) we seem to have a high like abnormal percentage of men who have a female pastor in their orbit. Like a mom or a grandma or something and that makes me... a little scared in . . like, is that what it takes?
	Leadership, churches have to do things before everyone agrees	Participant discusses the need to bring change before it's accepted everywhere	Include: personal stories of how this helped them, others; need for more	That's really the way that it's, I think, the best, the most natural way for people to experience it and for them to come around. Not to wait till the congregation agrees on it. Just do it. Just do it because it's a thing. And then people will come around.
	Men have to work at changing things	Actions men can do to help support and create more space for women	Include: advocacy, have 1:1 conversations with those who disagree, give up power and share the pulpit, call women "pastor"	And so it felt like - so you guys making like buddy plans without us? So I had to explain to him, like, hey, here's your lady leader lesson of the day. Women often need to be invited into things because many times we assume we're not invited.

	Importance of subtle, seemingly small things	Participant either calls something subtle or by description it fits this label	Include: when they say "it seems small" or "is small" or indicate in other words that this shouldn't be big or a hard thing to do	Aside from just making space at tables and listening for voices and their dialect, they say women and men. They begin with women and then men . . and that posture. And then I feel like I can come to the space and say men and women. And so then I can enter spaces and I can say men and women because I'm honoring their, their existence too right. But it seemed like it's a small thing, but it wasn't small. It isn't small.
	Misc. things that help	Participant discusses other things that help	Include: things not included elsewhere, many of which are practical things like childcare and headshots	Headshots is another thing. I mean, I've said, and I have to give like the ECC leadership, I've had a lot of ideas over the years and a lot of them have come into being. I don't know if it's because I'm squeaking or if more than me is squeaking, but a lot of things have happened. So I'm grateful. But I always thought, you know, why don't we just get a photographer at the pastor's retreat we have every year and then people with few resources don't have to cough up \$400 for decent headshots. It's just... little stuff.
	More flexibility needed for women	Participant talks about need for more help since often women primary caretakers for younger and older generations and/or bivocational	Include: mention of roles reflected in women as primary caretakers for younger and older generations and/or bivocational; recognition needed for their unique situations often	And there is a lot of connection and network within the denomination that isn't realistic for people who are bivocational or part-time. Even just flying to conferences. If you've got another job or you have little kids at home and you can't just pack up and spend \$800 and fly across the country. Even in our conference, we have a clergy retreat that I have never attended because it's just too hard to get to. My kids are getting older now, but when they were little, it was like, well, could you have childcare available, you know, things like that.
	Retreats	Participant talks of personal experience or known knowledge of ECC	Include: mentions of positives, how they have helped	(Describing retreat for specific ethnic minority group) And they invite people either who are struggling or who they feel they want to pour into because they see them as future lead leaders or something. And when they invited me was one of the first times I felt seen, right? And after that, like, you know, just getting to know them, it was just more of like a retreat, a real retreat of like, and for strengthening and retreat and all that.
	Mentoring/ groups	Participant talks of personal experience or known knowledge of ECC	Include: mentions of positives, how they have helped	And sure enough, like a year later. There were opportunities for clergy groups. So we finally got that going, but it's not robust enough and it's not supported in the way that it would need to be to be sustaining. But I do think clergy groups are so important. The covenant's doing a lot with coaching that helps it's not the same.
	ACCW suggestions	Participant talks about things ACCW	Include: specific ideas, general feedback	could make groups more known (mentoring, support, regional groups, retreats)

		should keep or start doing		
Comm, of ECC leadership		Participant mentions specific communication from ECC leaders	Include: conversations, public statements, thoughts on how communication felt	
	How women are talked about - ECC leaders	Participant shares story or references the importance of how women are talked about by ECC leadership	Include: stories shared about being referenced by title or not, talked about in same way as men or not, mention of women and leadership within the denomination	Like Tammy, even our president bragged at Midwinter, she's bragging about 45% of the ordination class this June is women. And I'm like, well, that's great, but that doesn't mean we're going to have jobs for them.
	How women are talked to - ECC leaders	Participant shares story or references the importance of how women are talked to by ECC leadership	Include: stories shared about being referenced by title or not, talked about in same way by peers, ignored or acknowledged	I kid you not, I sat down with one of our conference leaders to say like, I think I'm going to throw in for this and he patted my hand. He patted my hand and he goes, I'm just going to stop you. And he said, I'm working with the church chair on their search and they've made it clear they will not accept a resume from a female.
	Policies and resources content	My observations from documents, websites, policies regarding women	Include: statements from websites, documents, policies, resources and videos from ECC Midwinter that explain policies and history of ordination	Midwinter Tuesday breakout, YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gW8QV9r-W3s
	Active inclusion messages	My observations from documents, websites, policies regarding active inclusion	Include: statements from websites, documents, policies, resources and videos from ECC Midwinter that convey active inclusion	Document: "We seek to be a diverse and welcoming church that affirms the calling and gifts of the entire body of Christ. We support God's gifting of women by urging churches to encourage women in their congregations to embrace leadership" (The Evangelical Covenant Church Serve clergy, women in ministry, para. 1.).
Comm. of congregants		Participant discusses how congregants communicate about them or to them	Include: personal interactions, mention of congregants positive and negative comments	
	How women are talked about - congregants	Participants talk about being acknowledged, ignored, or	Include: stories of how people reference them, both to the pastor directly and to	it's interesting because it was primarily very positive. Especially the people who were in the church and um . . And there were some people even when I did announce that I was leaving, there were some people who said, we want to

		otherwise referenced by congregants	others; how their work is referenced	be sure we have another woman pastor. You know, this was such a good . . .
	How women are talked to -congregants	Participants talk about being acknowledged, ignored, or otherwise talked to by congregants	Include: stories of how people talk to them, how their work is referenced, positive and negative	it was pretty common for somebody to come up after I preached. And say, "thank you so much for sharing. Thank you so much. That would have been the typical way that they would say that. Not thank you so much for your sermon. Thank you so much for preaching.
Comm.of male colleagues		Participant discusses communication from male colleagues	Include: specific mention of pastors, co-pastors communication about or to them	
	How women are talked about - male colleagues	Participants talk about being acknowledged, ignored, or otherwise referenced by colleagues	Include: stories of how male colleagues reference them, both to the pastor directly and to others; how their work is referenced	In some ways, like in my context. I'm really fortunate. Because even in small ways like our congregation is super casual. Everybody's first name, you know, even pastors. But when my senior pastor, who's a male talks about me from the pulpit, you know, whether it's just an announcement or in any reference he specifically says pastor K not just K so that is from his mouth. Just as a common practice, he's validating my identity in the church. And so I think it's those kinds of things that really help the congregation come along.
	How woman are talked to - male colleagues	Participants talk about being acknowledged, ignored, or otherwise talked to by male colleagues	Include: stories of how male colleagues talk to them, how their work is referenced, positive and negative	I've explained working at my church as being like death by a thousand paper cuts. So, you know, nothing huge. No one's being like overtly like, you're not allowed to do that! But it's communicated over and over and over again by not calling me pastor. By not... introducing me in ways that communicate respect and collegiality.
Comm. patterns in responses		My observations on their answers	Include: thoughts from my reflection notes, also observations as I worked on coding transcripts	
	Give people a pass, grace, forgiveness, overlook things	Observations on how participant talks about incidents, describes others	Include: quotes reflecting the grace, time, patience they give to others; how they discuss their interactions with others; observations I see and what underlying broader messages could be	The opportunities that come, you have to take what's there. You can't be picky. So there's that too. There is sheer prejudice. There is sheer prejudice. And it's still there in Christians then you have to... you have to be able to work In terms of reconciliation and inclusion and listen a lot and not fly off the handle. Yeah, there are multiple reasons, I think, but it is the prejudice that drives me crazy. It's hard to address.

	Hopeful about present, and/or for change	Participant talks about appreciating ECC past, present and/or future; grateful and excited for what's to come	Include: comments of appreciation, encouragement, progress, and hope for more to come	But there's hope it's changing, you know it's changing. I'm hopeful and I'm hopeful. Yeah, I'm hopeful about it.
	Concerned for future, disappointment	Participant discusses concerns, fears about future of ECC, disappointment with past or present	Include: comments of fear, doubts, disappointment, anger, sadness about the ECC past, present, and/or moving ahead	There was a parallel, though not the exact same and for the same reasons. Shifting in the Covenant happening. And it, you know, it was getting more and more to a place where I was like, I don't really fit in this anymore. Now I'm pastoring this congregation that I'm responsible for. So I'm living in the tension of that.

Appendix D - Transcript Coding Sample

Participant 1

13:29:24 I kid you not, I sat down with one of our conference leaders to say like, I think I'm going to throw in for this and he patted my hand. He patted my hand and he goes, I'm just going to stop you. And he said, I'm working with the church chair on their search and they've made it clear they will not accept a resume from a female.

[Monica Reeves] 13:29:50 Jeez.

13:29:51 Just about lost my biscuits at the table. I looked at our conference leader and I said, that is unacceptable.

[Monica Reeves] 13:29:55 Yes.

13:29:59 Our denomination put in writing 50 years ago that we would ordain women and that we have a position paper that is clear that this is what we expect. And we just kicked out a church 20 miles from here because he was out of alignment with our sexuality position. So how come we're not doing the same thing for boys who are out of alignment in this when we have a position paper on both.

[Monica Reeves] 13:30:00 Mm-hmm.

13:30:26 I looked at him and I said, you're not the holder of the decision, but you sit at the table where it is. And I looked at him, I said, you fix it.

Participant 2

11:40:16 But it is notable that, that the majority of time people will automatically like move towards just using my name to like addressing me as pastor, where as the male pastors will pretty much always is pastor this, right? And I noticed that even within our church, which has three female pastors. So it's interesting.

[Monica Reeves] 11:40:24 Hmm.

11:40:40 The um, the other thing that I thought, and this is maybe more specific to the fact that I was working part-time or quarter time, not like full-time. But like the number of people who've asked me if I work. And I was like, in the church, right? I'm like, I work as a pastor here. Like, what are you saying?

And I'm not the, like a number of other people there were pastors also who were part-time and it was like. I know you didn't ask him if he worked.

[Monica Reeves] 11:41:13 Yeah.

11:41:18 So I think it's the unconscious bias that, you know. And one of the clergywomen retreats, they made a t-shirt and it was like I mean, the t-shirts are really cute. They're actually selling them as like a fundraiser, but one of them says, preach like a girl. But the fact that so many of those women felt like that shirt was, like the response was so great and they were like people, like other pastors tell them they love this shirt and stuff. And I was like that means that they are not being seen, right? Like that's uh

[Monica Reeves] 11:42:13 Yeah.

11:42:15 That's a commentary on the fact that they feel unseen as and not acknowledged and recognized for who they are, as like for their occupation right, for their calling. And so those are the moments, right? Like, and so it's not always the big moments. It's those little like micro, I don't know if it's microaggressions, but it's like those micro moments that just kind of overall is draining right, like and . .so so women like, and I, so that's why I think it's harder to be a clergywomen sometimes. Because you are dealing not like, and you're dealing with, with rejection and like almost like undermining your calling and spiritual authority on all levels. And sometimes internally too, like you have been taught, like depending on where your background

is, you have world views and things that were taught to you that's coming up, right? Like anytime, like initially when I was working as a pastor, like anytime there's a failure, I'm like. Maybe this isn't my calling. Like I struggled with my calling for a long time because every time I failed, I was kind of like. Oh my God. I can't even say I failed, every time something didn't go perfectly, I was like. Is this because it's not like, I'm not supposed to be doing this. I don't like, maybe I'm like being disobedient. Maybe like, you know, like I, have the spiral internally, right?