

Summary of criticisms and theological questions faced by women in ministry

Of the 169 women's surveys, 71 (about one-half of surveys returned) responded to the question about criticisms. The following themes emerged:

Reasons for criticism:

Comments/questions about biblical interpretation (33 answers)

"How can you claim to take scripture seriously when you so blatantly go against those clear words about women? A hermeneutic that allows women in ministry can easily be stretched to include a hermeneutic that allows or condones homosexuality."

"Some have quoted scripture; others have asked me for an explanation based on my understanding of scripture."

Questioned authority to preach (5 answers)

"The questions I faced were focused mostly around whether women should be in a preaching role. I saw this area as one of my gifts and was clear from the beginning that I wanted to share that role with my spouse."

Criticism about apparel/physical appearance (6 answers)

"I made the mistake of wearing pants at an inter-Mennonite event where I was leading worship. The ministerial got a letter about that later."

"One woman criticized my wearing of ear rings. She thought I'd go to hell because I got my ears pierced."

Questioned ordination/priestly role/power/feminist (4 answers)

"You are feminist and power hungry."

"I felt the distancing of my feminist friends in the congregation when I moved into conference leadership. Theologically they were supportive of a woman as a pastor; but the change in our relationship was dramatic. They were quite clear I was no longer "one of them."

Comments about pregnant pastor (2 answers)

"Never had a pregnant pastor before."

Comment about singleness (1 answer)

Who offered the criticism?

Within the congregation (14 answers)

"A number of folks in the congregation told me they had nothing

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against me personally but they'd been taught from the Bible that women should not be preachers. One man finally agreed to allow me to visit him because he said, 'My wife appreciates your ministry.' Another person, an older woman, said: you know how I feel about women ministers; but I like YOU!"

Community/outside the congregation (12 answers)

"My experiences of criticism include – letters in denominational publications; a few pastors in the conference; a customs agent at the airport in 1997; a cousin."

Family/close friends (8 answers)

"A nephew in the MB church speaks out and writes about the sin of female pastors; uses both theological (women not to be over men) and practical arguments (what about the children)."

Conference leadership/professor (4 answers)

"My bishop told me I found a new career but he wanted me to know I'll never get the position."

How was the criticism conveyed?

Direct conversation (20 answers)

"One older woman asked me if I believe only men should be ordained?"

"Comments about whether my family is OK with me being away from home so much; people asking about Bible verses that say women shouldn't be ministers and how I interpret these."

Request male pastor to perform wedding/funeral/pulpit exchange or barred from participation (4 answers)

"At some interdenominational pastors' gatherings, I was asked to meet with the pastor's wives."

Letter (3 answers)

By leaving the church because opposed to women in church leadership (3 answers)

No criticisms at all (7 answers)

"No criticisms – this congregation actually prefers women pastors!"

"In this congregation and area, I really have to say there are no criticisms. It's hard to imagine, but I am in a pocket of very forward thinking folks. This church has for many years had a male and a female on their staff."

"I am blessed because I am the second female pastor and because the church has had female pastors for years."

Summary of personal responses to criticisms about women in ministry:

Of the 169 surveys returned, there were 64 written responses about how criticism was handled. The responses reflect maturity (not wanting to argue; not insisting that they need to change yet not apologizing for who they are) and a rootedness in a clear sense of God's call.

Type of Response:

Engage in discussion (rather than argue or debate) (25 answers)

“If they are willing to talk, I share my story and perspectives with them and listen to theirs. If they are convinced theirs is the only correct view, I don’t waste my time trying to change their mind.”

“I have been calm, telling them their concerns are valid to consider. I try not to argue with them.”

Let pastoral work speak for itself (14 answers)

“I let my work speak – in other words, after we were there, it was no longer an issue, except for a few. In time, numerous members who were skeptical or opposed became strong supporters for me and appreciated my preaching.”

Make a self-differentiated statement about role (13 answers)

“Listening and talking to people, not insisting they need to change but also not apologizing for who I am and the call I have on my life.”

Listen to criticism (11 answers)

“I listen to criticisms and let them go.”

“By concentrating on understanding where people were coming from and affording them the same respect as I hoped to receive.”

Coexist/ignore criticism (7 answers)

“I have stayed away from most debates and have just quietly gone about doing what I feel called to do. In this way, I have earned much trust. The fact that I am petite and have a soft voice also helps to make me appear to be less threatening.”

Debate (2 answers)

Attitude of respondent toward criticism

Gracious response/no fighting (16 answers)

“I try to be gracious; does that mean avoiding the conflict?”

“I have stayed away from most debates and have just quietly gone about doing what I feel called to do. In this way, I have earned much trust. The fact that I am petite and have a soft voice also helps to make me appear to be less threatening.”

“I refuse to get hooked into arguments. I learned at a young age to handle challenges with skills such as humor, the wisdom and ability to keep my mouth shut, patience, tolerance and compassion. My call is clear, my life of faith and discipleship is integral, and this really helps me keep my focus clean and my foundations as a minister steady.”

Effects of criticism

Hurt, upset (6 answers)

“I have chosen for the most part to engage criticisms by trying to fill my role in the best way possible and to let that speak for itself. The estrangement of my friends was very painful for me.”

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“I try to explain that I try to balance church and family life. I explain my view of biblical interpretation. But I find myself frustrated by these questions that male colleagues don’t get.”

Created self doubt (6 answers)

“I handle the criticisms, but it is the very present shadow of doubt hanging over the certainty of being called. (A young pastor.)”

Support was essential in coping with criticism (6 answers)

“I take criticism seriously and continue to have a spiritual director or pastoral counselor to give me objective feedback.”

“Avoided the critics and connected with others who support and affirm women in ministry; trusted MC USA and my husband that women in leadership is OK; eventually grew more courageous and tried to connect and dialogue with critics, to no avail.”

Years of experience in ministry aided in response to criticism (6 answers)

Criticisms and Theological Questions faced by women in ministry:

1. How can you claim to take scripture seriously when you so blatantly go against those clear words about women? (Currently I'm in the uncomfortable position of chairing the state pastor's cluster where about one-third of the group are opposed to women in ministry. At our last meeting in which we talked about an action our conference was taking to discipline a pastor who had officiated at a same-sex covenanting ceremony, the initial action was deemed to be too weak, no action at all. The comment was made rather bitterly in my direction that 'A hermeneutic that allows women in ministry can easily be stretched to include a hermeneutic that allows or condones homosexuality.'")
2. Are we changing what the Bible says? Are we ready to follow a woman?
3. Improper dress; women are not to preach.
4. One couple that didn't believe in women in ministry left after Sunday School every time I was to preach.
5. A nephew in the MB church speaks out and writes about the sin of female pastors. He uses both theological (women not to be over men) and practical arguments (what about the children).
6. Critique mainly from family that women in ministry are not biblical.
7. In our area ministerial, I was not allowed to preach in certain churches on pulpit exchange Sunday.
8. My bishop told me I found a new career but he wanted me to know I'll never get the position.
9. Mostly on clothing (sleeveless blouses, pants); criticisms come because of the welcoming stance of our church though I am never sure that my being a woman with short hair isn't the first problem.
10. Can a woman be priestly?
11. One older woman asked me if I believe only men should be ordained?
12. The questions were focused mostly around whether women should be in a preaching role. I saw this area as one of my gifts and was clear from the beginning that I wanted to share that role with my spouse.
13. My first pastorate was in a Hispanic congregation and many of the churches we had fellowship with were not open to a woman pastor. At some interdenominational pastors' gatherings, I was asked to meet with the pastor's wives.
14. I made the mistake of wearing pants at an inter-Mennonite event where I was leading worship and the ministerial got a letter about that later.
15. Clear expression that women should not be pastors; Bible says it is wrong; I was asked not to serve at a funeral by family members not in our congregation.
16. No criticisms; this congregation actually prefers women pastors!
17. Criticism comes from people outside the congregation who call and are expecting a different kind of Mennonite Church and are surprised that I am the pastor and not the secretary.
18. Very few compared with most women. My experiences include: letters in denominational publications; a few pastors in the conference; a customs agent at the airport in 1997 and a cousin.
19. I recognize that for some in my congregation, it is difficult to differentiate between faith itself and their theological questions and concerns regarding women in ministry. I can identify because it is also difficult for me at this point to differentiate between faith and responding to call in ministry.
20. The Bible teaches women should be quiet! Something with two heads is a monster, not a pastor (in reference to co-pastoral model).
21. Extended family struggles with biblical texts around women in ministry. I have also had tough times with these texts but through seminary studies and research, have come to see these passages in a new light.
22. I Timothy passage about women being silent.

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23. One person threatened to leave; one person did not know if women were to be leaders over men.
24. Comments about whether my family is OK with me being away from home so much; people asking about Bible verses that say women shouldn't be ministers and how I interpret these.
25. I've received no criticisms from the congregations I've served; but a fair bit from other places – letters in the mail; statements at conferences.
26. Very little.
27. The bigger issue for me is not about women in ministry but SINGLE women in ministry. LOTS of pressure.
28. Lack of support from parents and some of their friends (all biblical reasons, not personal).
29. Most resistance has been subconscious. People often assumed I lacked training and experience. I felt these assumptions wouldn't have been made as quickly if I were male.
30. Some have quoted scripture; others have asked me for an explanation based on my understanding of scripture.
31. For me, questions have never been couched as related to gender. They are about style, gifts, and fit.
32. Debates outside the church are scripture passages. Inside the church criticism is expressed more through attitude, avoidance, not direct.
33. Family criticism – silent negativity.
34. Creation accounts; Pauline theology; church tradition.
35. A professor at AMBS told me I might never find a church because of my gender and age. (I was the first in my class to be placed!)
36. One woman criticized my wearing of earrings. She thought I'd go to hell because I got my ears pierced. Other than that, I have not faced any overt/direct criticism personally.
37. I have had face-to-face discussions and confrontations on the issue as well as letters trying to dissuade me from being disobedient to God by taking a male role/prerogative in the church.
38. The criticisms have not come from the church or the community but from within myself. I wonder if we've understood the Bible correctly. Is there something else I should be doing or a different way of doing things so that women's gifts are fully used but not going against something.
39. The theological questions have come from my family. Do we take Paul's words literally today? One woman in church stopped attending because a radio preacher she listens to says women should not be in church leadership, among other things.
40. Very few criticisms, though I felt the distancing of my feminist friends in the congregation when I moved into conference leadership. Theologically they were supportive of a woman as a pastor; but the change in our relationship was dramatic. They were quite clear I was no longer "one of them."
41. Questions of biblical interpretation; feminist theology.
42. "You are a feminist and power hungry."
43. "That man is the head of the house" and women should be quiet in the church.
44. In this congregation and area, I really have to say there are no criticisms. It's hard to imagine, but I am in a pocket of very forward thinking folks. This church has for many years had a male and a female on their staff.
45. In doing weddings, we have had to have my husband do the "actual marrying" in a couple of cases as a concession to a family of another denomination.
46. Really no criticisms – surprising.
47. Criticism surrounded the Pauline passages on women keeping silent in the church. The irony was that I was permitted and encouraged to do anything in leadership but preach (initially).

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48. Particular scripture passages have been quoted to me and then asked how I interpret these passages.
49. A number of folks in the congregation told me they had nothing against me personally but they'd been taught from the Bible that women should not be preachers. One man finally agreed to allow me to visit him because he said, "My wife appreciates your ministry." Another person, an older woman, said, "You know how I feel about women ministers, but I like YOU!"
50. Women should not preach, be pastors, or be ordained; women pastors should not wear slacks; women pastors should not dance.
51. A conference minister and others in the conference believed the Bible calls women to remain silent and not be in leadership positions.
52. Lack of respect from fellow pastors in citywide ministerial.
53. The male in this couple who left had made a statement years earlier about leaving if a woman were ever called to be pastor because of his reading of the Bible. When they left, he said clearly I (Anita) was not the problem. It was that I'm a woman!
54. Discuss why Mennonites let ladies be pastors. (That is how the question is framed from other denominations!)
55. Very, very little.
56. Biblical passages that discourage women in ministry.
57. There have been a few male conservatives, mainly from other denominations, who have expressed that they do not believe that women are called to serve in the pastorate or leadership.
58. Every possible criticism, every scripture that anyone chooses to misuse as well as all the cultural traditions that say women aren't supposed to do this.
59. No criticisms from within the church but more from friends and family regarding biblical interpretation.
60. No criticisms, probably because I do not preach.
61. The bible says women should be silent in the church. The Bible says man is the head of the church, household, you name it. The Bible says women are supposed to be submissive.
62. Never had a pregnant pastor before; questions were raised about having two women pastors; would there be cat fights?
63. I am blessed because I am the second female pastor and because the church has had female pastors for years.
64. You name it, I've faced it. (older pastor)
65. All kinds over the years, less recently; mainly from conservative interpretations of Bible. I believe resistance is rooted in fear of change.
66. I was asked to affirm the Lancaster Conference's statement on women and I said I could not. I work with some men as peers who believe women should not be in leadership except under a man in a church situation. They accept leadership at EMM because "it is not a church".
67. My home congregation (of origin) has not welcomed women into pastoral leadership, preaching or elder roles.
68. Almost no criticism in 26 plus years in four different congregations. At times a person might not have liked me because I'm a woman. But no one has raised biblical or theological concerns to me EVER.
69. None other than within myself.
70. Ordination of a woman.
71. No criticism. My first position was at a United Methodist church. We had a woman bishop at the time. Now the Mennonite Church is the opposite. It has been striking to see how big an issue women in leadership is. (middle aged woman)

Responses to criticisms about women in ministry:

1. I refuse to get hooked into arguments. I learned at a young age to handle challenges with skills such as humor, the wisdom and ability to keep my mouth shut, patience, tolerance and compassion. My call is clear, my life of faith and discipleship is integral, and this really helps me keep my focus clean and my foundations as a minister steady.
2. Listen ... listen ... hear ... change comes more readily as they experience my pastoral gifts and have a relationship with me. We will invite a resource person to provide two to three classes on the theology of women in ministry.
3. At first I tried to argue and convince using Biblical proof. In my later years, I do less of that and just try to be accepting of differences of opinions.
4. In a particularly difficult relationship over theological differences, we do not discuss the differences. We co-exist clutching our particular biases.
5. Scriptures I highlight. God pours out God's spirit on all persons. There were women disciples. I will be held accountable for the gifts I've been given; not others.
6. I have generally backed off. I am very willing to engage people about this issue but not necessarily in every time and place.
7. Try to be gracious; does that mean avoiding the conflict?
8. I listened to how she came to believe her point of view. She based her beliefs on scriptures. I thanked her for the leadership gifts she brings to the congregation; mentioned a few women in the Bible and in the church who I am grateful they chose to use gifts to benefit Jesus' mission.
9. I've handled criticism as a chaplain and from within my family by listening as carefully as I can and by engaging in discussion.
10. With prayer and support from others. I've found that other leaders are better at fighting the battle for us. I don't think taking it on directly would help my ministry at all.
11. I let my work speak. In other words, after we were there, it was no longer an issue, except for a few. In time, numerous members who were skeptical or opposed became strong supporters for me and appreciated my preaching.
12. I have talked about what I understand the scriptures to say about women in ministry. Sometimes have felt hurt or upset.
13. I have stayed away from most debates and have just quietly gone about doing what I feel called to do. In this way, I have earned much trust. The fact that I am petite and have a soft voice also helps to make me appear to be less threatening.
14. Mostly, have served out of my own clear sense of call. Sometimes, I've tried to explain my understanding of scripture or simply told my story of call.
15. Listening primarily.
16. If they are willing to talk, I share my story and perspectives with them and listen to theirs. If they are convinced theirs is the only correct view, I don't waste my time trying to change their mind.
17. Invite discussion of biblical interpretation, cultural, historical background; simply demonstrate effectiveness of a pastor; welcome questions, different perspectives – don't get defensive or take personally.
18. In response to question about my ordination, I told the church and the conference that what they did with me (ordain or not) was up to them. They would have to answer for that and I would submit to their wisdom. But if they said I could not use my gifts for God's work (teach, counsel, preach) that would be a problem.
19. Since I have acted on my own inner calling from God, that is something others cannot argue with. As for the scriptures, I may have some surprises when I get to heaven; but I prefer to read Paul's positive comments about women and Jesus' too.
20. Listened.
21. I have been calm, telling them their concerns are valid to consider. I try not to argue with them.

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22. I try to explain that I try to balance church and family life. I explain my view of biblical interpretation. But I find myself frustrated by these questions that male colleagues don't get.
23. For the most part, just continued to do the job to the best of my ability. I was always willing to engage in thoughtful dialogue with anyone, but never felt like I needed to subject myself to an abusive tirade.
24. I've felt deeply hurt by my mother's resistance through we've remained in conversation. It's difficult for us to debate the issue in a thorough way; but over the years she has mellowed and I've become less dependent upon her approval.
25. I do my job; it has to speak for itself. My husband has also been very aware and helpful.
26. I take criticism seriously and continue to have a spiritual director or pastoral counselor to give me objective feedback.
27. Sharing my personal experience; appealing that my primary desire it to be faithful to God by loving and caring for the church.
28. Be the best pastor I can be; pastor gently with those who doubt. This led to acceptance.
29. Try to do a good job as a pastor.
30. When there are general discussions and questions, I emphasize the many women leaders in the early church and Jesus' welcome of all – including women. In the end, I say there are many confusing and contradictory things and that we don't fully understand the culture and the times; but we need to make decisions and follow our call as best we can.
31. I submitted to the critique that women were not allowed to preach.
32. Criticism about whether it is right for women to be in ministry have caused doubt and stress for me. But I have put them aside when there is nothing I can do to address people's concerns.
33. I listen and let them go.
34. I have chosen for the most part to engage criticisms by trying to fill my role in the best way possible and to let that speak for itself. The estrangement of my friends was very painful for me.
35. Listening and talking to people, not insisting they need to change but also not apologizing for who I am and the call I have on my life.
36. I called the older women who I suspected were not supportive and asked them how they viewed my call. They said, "I would not have voted for you; but because you were selected as the candidate, I said I support you." I tried my best to let them freely express their feelings.
37. I've always tried to "prove myself" by doing an exceptional job (a great recipe for burnout).
38. By concentrating on understanding where people were coming from and affording them the same respect as I hoped to receive.
39. Largely, I have said very little because no one said it to me directly. The longer I worked, the more trust and love grew until eventually I heard no complaints.
40. Complaints have been difficult to handle as they are really unstated.
41. I don't try to change people's minds, that's God's job.
42. I often acknowledged that some persons understand those scriptures differently than I. Sometimes I told of my own struggle with "call" and growing up in the church where I experienced all male leadership. Sometimes I just listen.
43. To one woman I said, "I've never had a woman pastor before either. I'm sure I also would need to adjust to something new." I always refuse to argue with anyone. I sometimes find discussions helpful.
44. I've received them as graciously as possible and with good humor.
45. I usually say that I don't always understand why I was called to ministry but feel like I am responsible to use the gifts God gave me, however God desires.

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46. We used mediation in one situation. The man was not open to any discussion so he left.
47. I have assumed acceptance when I interact with people and fulfill my role as pastor. I strive to be clear and strong in my own sense of call and not dwell on others' criticisms and questions.
48. Smile, nod, and listen; tell them what my conference minister told us; invite my mentor to class to talk to them.
49. Tried to show in my personal relationships that I am not threatened by criticism and am functioning effectively as a pastor.
50. I don't try to argue. I try to serve God faithfully as pastor.
51. Hopefully, I respond with grace. One critic told me not to take it personally!
52. Avoided the critics and connected with others who support and affirm women in ministry; trusted MC USA and my husband that women in leadership is OK; eventually grew more courageous and tried to connect and dialogue with critics--to no avail.
53. I have kindly referred them to women in the Bible who were used mightily by God, such as Deborah, Priscilla, Phebe.
54. Sometimes I talk to the people, sometimes I ignore them, sometimes I cry, sometimes I cuss.
55. I handle the criticisms – but it is the very present shadow of doubt hanging over the certainty of being called a young pastor.
56. Sometimes I talk about cultural context. Sometimes I tell my personal story; sometimes I have chosen not to respond. It depends on how important the relationship is to me. I'm not out to fight theological wars over this issue.
57. When I was younger, I didn't handle the criticism and questions well. I personalized them. As I've ministered more and aged, I still hear questions but do not feel a need to change that person's perspective. I continue to minister where I'm accepted.
58. Through cautious words, much prayer, and Bible study.
59. Explained that I interpret scripture differently; say that I am following the tradition of my mothers. My grandmothers were ordained deaconesses in Virginia Mennonite Conference.
60. Prayer; preach my socks off and leave my parsonage door open 24-7. Work hard and all will go well.
61. Passive, dropped out; got depressed; gave up; felt rejected; complained to God; questioned self.
62. A family member of the deceased was uncomfortable and said he could not attend his mom's funeral if I did the meditation because it was unbiblical. The male co-pastor told the family that if they wanted our team to do the funeral, I would bring the message. The son did attend and sat in the back row and was OK with that. (That son did not attend our church or any Mennonite church).
63. I spent as much time as possible with my critics and they soon learned to love and accept me.
64. I was OK with the one pastor in our conference who was in conflict over my upcoming ordination because: he was honest; he was willing to wrestle with it scripturally and talk with a colleague; he did not stand in the way of the conference decision; I have preached in his congregation on numerous occasions since my ordination.