

Frequently Asked Questions about the *Gathering Stories, Envisioning Equity* Research Study on Women in Ministry

What is the *Gathering Stories, Envisioning Equity* research study?

[*Gathering Stories, Envisioning Equity: Toward a Peace Church in Which Women in Ministry Thrive*](#) is a denomination-wide study combining research conducted by Conference Minister Amy Zimbelman of [Mountain States Mennonite Conference](#) and Elizabeth Johnson, a Ph.D. candidate in sociology at Duke University and member of [Raleigh \(North Carolina\) Mennonite Church](#). Over the course of 18 months, Zimbelman and Johnson conducted one-on-one qualitative interviews with a diverse sample of women in Mennonite Church USA leadership and administered a survey to a nationally representative random sample of active, licensed MC USA pastors.

The study was funded by Mennonite Church USA's Women in Leadership Ministry, the Louisville Institute, the Duke University Department of Sociology, and the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion.

What is the *Gathering Stories, Envisioning Equity* research study about?

The goal of this study was to learn more about the experiences of women currently in ministry with MC USA (who represent 35% of total active, licensed MC USA clergy) as well as some of the experiences of clergywomen who have recently left ministry. Guiding questions included: *What are their joys? What are their struggles? And how can their stories inform us in MC USA to better create cultures and institutions where all leaders thrive?*

Completing this study involved asking difficult questions from within the denomination and gathering data that can help us do life together with more kindness and justice.

What is Women in Leadership?

A vital partner of this project, [Women in Leadership \(WIL\)](#) works to dismantle patriarchal systems in MC USA by empowering women to live out the call of God in their lives, increase their capacities, and contribute their wisdom in congregations, area conferences, agencies and institutions. It creates space for resources, conversation and action for all women in our churches who are in leadership.

What are some foundational understandings of the study?

First, this study began with the understanding that **women can and should be pastors**. This is because the founder of our faith, Jesus, called women to preach, respected women as equals, supported women, and was financially supported by women. Also, a predecessor to our denomination, General Conference, has ordained women for about half a century.

Academic rigor was essential for ensuring that study results are accurate and helpful to both the Church and the academy. Johnson has consulted with other sociologists of religion throughout the project, including her advisor Dr. Mark Chaves and dissertation committee member Dr. Nancy Ammerman. The study's research methods and Zimbelman and Johnson's data-sharing agreement were approved by Duke's Institutional Review Board, which has a rigorous process for ensuring that research studies are ethical.

This study was **conducted with an eye towards [intersectionality](#)**, the idea that having multiple marginalized identities can compound mistreatment so that it may be exponentially more. Therefore, the research worked to overrepresent the voices of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color), lesbian, and bisexual women as compared to the denomination as a whole. (It should be noted that survey findings about gender are reported in terms of men and women in order to preserve the confidentiality of the small number of nonbinary clergy who responded to the survey.)

What are some topics explored by the *Gathering Stories, Envisioning Equity* research study?

The one-on-one interviews covered around 15 topics, including a woman's call to ministry, how power works in her church, harms she may have experienced, and her hopes for the future. This qualitative style of interview allowed the researchers to go in-depth and better understand the complexities and contexts of stories of ministry.

The results of the nationally representative survey allow for a broader, big picture understanding of the experiences of pastors of all genders. The new survey questionnaire designed and tested for this project included questions about topics like job satisfaction, trust, and health; experiences in ministry (including experiences of harm); and basic information about the respondent and their congregation, which helped illuminate which clergy in which settings are most at risk of harm.

Where can I hear about the findings of the *Gathering Stories, Envisioning Equity* research study?

A [MennoCon seminar](#) initially given on July 5, 2023 is [available as a recording](#). In the presentation, Zimbelman and Johnson shared major findings from their one-on-one interviews and nationwide surveys.

Zimbelman and Johnson are continuing to share their findings in written publications as well as presentations in MC USA settings and at academic conferences. Zimbelman recently published articles such as [this one](#) on the importance of churches supporting their pastors and [this one](#) about the role of humor, specifically sass, as an equalizing force in women's responses to mistreatment.

To receive more information about this ongoing research project, please sign up for their email list at bit.ly/supportingpastorssignup.

Read more about the research study here: <https://www.mennoniteusa.org/news/researchers-to-present/>.