

A Survey of Women's Studies

Seminaries are beginning to support the calling of women to full-time ministry. Which institutions are on the forefront of this trend?

Jennifer Kemp was fairly certain God was calling her into the ministry, so to test the waters, she decided to take a weekend course at a seminary near her job in Boston. The class, "Proclamation and Communication," had two women and 22 men.

"The first night," Jennifer recalled, "one gentleman asked me why I was in seminary. I said, 'I am not in seminary right now. I am taking this class to see if seminary is something I'd like to pursue in the future.'

"Then he asked, 'What do you want to do ultimately?'

"I said, 'I believe that God has gifted me as a communicator, and I would like to teach people about God's Word.'

"'Oh, you want to be the superintendent of Sunday school,' he said.

"'No,' I answered, 'I didn't mention Sunday school or being a superintendent.'

"Then he said, 'Oh, you want to work with college students.'

"I said, 'No, I interned with InterVarsity, and I am pretty sure that collegiate ministry is not my primary call.'

"At this point in the conversation, a friend of his turned around and jokingly said, 'Hey, maybe she wants to be a pastor and preach from the pulpit!'

"I said, 'Bingo, that is exactly what I think I am called to do.' That was the end of the conversation."

It was not the first time Jennifer had faced resistance to her

call to the pulpit. During her college years, it was difficult for her to reconcile her sense of calling with the realization that her home church did not support women in ministry.

Jennifer did not want to defend her call while she was in seminary, so she chose a school that supports women in ministry. Today she is a master of divinity student at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California, and a candidate for ordination with the Presbyterian Church ().

What about you? Is God calling you into a full-time ministry for which you need advanced training?

To help you find the seminary that is right for you, SpiritLed Woman interviewed faculty members and students at three traditional seminaries and in one alternative program that strongly support women in ministry. Here's what we found:

ASBURY THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

The main campus of Asbury Theological Seminary is located in the rolling hills of Wilmore, Kentucky. The Methodist seminary also has a satellite campus in Orlando, Florida, and long-distance learning programs.

Professor Paul Chilcote makes reference to a long tradition of support for women in ministry within the Methodist Church. He states: "At first John Wesley believed that the Scriptures prohibited women from preaching, but as he witnessed women functioning in pastoral roles during the Wesleyan revival, he began to revise his understanding of those texts because of the fruit he saw in the lives of the women.

"Over time, Wesley became one of the strongest proponents of women preachers in the church." But despite Wesley's views, Chilcote adds: "Today, on a local church level you'll find a mixed bag of responses to women in ministry. Many seriously question a woman's call to the ministry."

Regarding the unfair way in which women are judged, Chilcote

offers this observation: "In general, I see a much deeper sense of call among women than is present among some of the men simply because they have had to struggle with it with greater intensity."

He continues: "Many women felt called into the ministry during early adulthood, but they repressed the call because of cultural prohibitions. Later in life, they began to respond to that call."

"At Asbury we prepare women for what they are going to face. We do this in formal ways in our classes and in informal ways through mentoring, networking, and the Support Women in Ministry group, or SWIM Team—a support group for women by women."

FULLER THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

With nearly 3,000 students, Fuller Theological Seminary is the largest seminary in North America. It has nine satellite campuses located throughout the West, as well as a long-distance learning program. About a third of the students are women.

Elizabeth Glanville earned her Ph.D. at Fuller, where today she is an adjunct assistant professor and the director of doctoral studies for the School of World Missions.

Glanville says of Fuller, "I have had nothing but support." But she found that graduates leaving Fuller often face resistance. "They don't find the support within their denominational systems that they had here on campus," she says.

For women who are pursuing full-time ministry, she advises: "First, go in with your eyes open. Second, know that God has called you to it. If you know you are called, you will stick with it. Third, know that you will need to prove yourself."

In addition to Glanville's course on leadership development, Fuller offers three other classes on women's issues. The subjects are: "Women, the Bible and the Church," "Women in Cross-Cultural Ministry" and "Women in Church History."

REGENT UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF DIVINITY

Regent is a renewal theology school with roots in the 20th-century Pentecostal and charismatic renewal movements. The institution offers M.A., ., . and Ph.D. degrees at its main Virginia campus in Virginia Beach, at its satellite campus in Alexandria, and through long-distance learning programs.

"Across the board there is a high level of support for women's issues at Regent," states Mara Crabtree, an associate professor in the School of Divinity who specializes in teaching Christian spirituality, spiritual formation and women's studies.

Women's issues are addressed in a number of classes, according to Crabtree. "Professors help students interpret the biblical texts that support women's call to ministry and teach students about important female figures in the church."

In addition to other classes, Crabtree teaches "Women and Men in Ministry, a Biblical Paradigm" and "Mentoring for Women in Ministry."

"In the first course," she explains, "we look carefully at the Old and New Testament texts that relate specifically to women in ministry—their history, their culture, their life with God and their interactions with each other.

"We look at how Jesus Christ interacted with women. We look at contemporary issues—women and men in ministry leadership, sexuality issues and gender differences."

The "Mentoring for Women in Ministry" course takes a different approach. Students choose mentors with whom they interact during the semester.

"I invite women leaders to share their faith journey with the class," she continued. "We focus on mentoring models that work well for women."

"Men tend to be very goal-oriented," she said. "Women like spontaneity and are more focused on relationships. They want to get together with a more experienced person and let that relationship develop."

Regent University sponsors several ministry events geared to women. Each year the school hosts a women's conference, informal luncheons, Bible studies and prayer meetings.

WAGNER LEADERSHIP INSTITUTE

Wagner Leadership Institute (WLI) trains church and ministry leaders during concentrated training sessions held in Colorado Springs, Colorado. Students come from all over the world to sit under the teaching of well-known charismatic leaders such as Cindy Jacobs, Dutch Sheets and C. Peter Wagner.

Associate's, bachelor's, master's and doctoral diplomas are granted by WLI, but the school does not seek accreditation. Instead it focuses on classroom teaching, practical training and impartation.

The institute offers more than 22 different concentrations. One of these is a Women in Ministry Fast Track, which is an eight-day session offered yearly.

The annual session is conducted by four speakers who teach for two days each. The Spring 2002 Fast Track featured Cindy Jacobs, Quin Sherrer, Naomi Dowdy and Judy Radeke.

Each speaker covered an issue confronting women called to the ministry. According to Jack Sytsema, Dean of WLI: "Cindy Jacobs looked at the tough Scriptures, explaining why WLI thinks women are qualified for ministry."

“Quin taught on practical issues, encouraging women who struggle to balance ministry, children and family. Naomi taught on being a woman leader in a male-dominated leadership world. Judy, who has a ministry to homeless, runaway kids in Hollywood, talked about effective ministry to kids.”

The institute has about 1,000 students in the United States. Sixty percent of them are women.

“Our typical female student,” says Sytsema, “is a 40-year-old woman from a charismatic background who wants to move into a paid position in ministry. Many are leaders in their church or speakers at conferences who believe they are called to ministry, but their church does not recognize women in ministry, so they feel rejected.”

WLI teacher Quin Sherrer says: “I tell women in the leadership classes that if God has called them, they should do what they can to be equipped—attend classes and spend time studying the Word. Don’t just sit and wait for doors to open; prepare yourselves.

“We have classroom lectures, but we also pray for each student to activate her anointing. I try to pack into the sessions at WLI everything I wish someone had taught me when I was starting out in ministry years ago.”

Jimmie Reed, a 49-year-old doctoral student at WLI, had a thriving international teaching ministry with her husband but began to sense a more intense call to ministry. She was drawn to Wagner’s distinct offerings.

“At WLI you get more than just academic teaching; you get impartation,” she says. “It heightens you, broadens you and takes you to another level. Now I am more confident, more bold.”

The presence of women in seminaries can help to dismantle prejudicial views toward women’s roles in the church. If you

desire seminary instruction, here are a few guidelines for understanding what makes a supportive environment:

Biblical teaching that will look at the entire Bible in its cultural context instead of lifting out one or two passages to make a point

A supportive faculty committed to training women in ministry

Classes on women in ministry

The presence of strong women on campus who support one another.

For women who require advanced study in order to prepare for their calling, the list of options is growing. Female seminarians are beginning to find they are no longer just tolerated in the classroom; they are welcomed and nurtured there.

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