

CALLED

Women in Ministry in Ireland 2017: Report

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Executive Summary

This report seeks to explore the experience of women in Christian ministry in Ireland.

‘Ministry’ in this report means that women work in Christian ministry as their main life choice. This is self-defined and includes ordained and lay ministries.

This report should be read as an initial exploration which sets out to faithfully present participants’ perspectives on their ministries.

It draws on twenty two questionnaire responses and eighteen interviews with women working in Christian ministry in Ireland, in the North and the Republic, across a variety of Christian denominations. A total of twenty-nine women participated.

This report offers a brief contextual framework for women’s ministry both historically and theologically. It will close by identifying some questions for future research.

Women’s Ministry

Women’s ministry has been a contested issue, principally in the area of the ordination of women within the Christian denominations. Interpretation of biblical texts, particularly in Genesis and the Epistles of Paul has divided Christians as to the appropriate role of women in Christian ministry. In the twenty first century, many of the Christian churches in Ireland admit women to all ministries. However the Catholic Church, by far the largest denomination, does not admit women to ordained priesthood or to diaconate. Other of the Protestant churches including the Free Presbyterian Church of Ulster; the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Ireland; Brethren and Association of Baptist Churches in Ireland also restrict some or all leadership roles to male ministers.

Women currently occupy a wide variety of roles across the churches including priest, deacon, bishop, elder, minister for youth or family; worship leader; parish leader;

spiritual accompaniment and retreats; social ministries; preaching; hospital and school chaplaincy; education and pastoral supervision.

In Ireland women are a minority in most of these areas in each Christian denomination. It is estimated that over 400 women are currently ministering as their main life choice in Ireland¹. Outside this number I acknowledge the possibly large number of women who may have a very significant commitment to Christian ministry on a voluntary basis and who are not counted among the more formal roles. There are also a significant number of retired women, across the ministries and particularly in the aging Catholic religious congregations who are often still involved in ministry on a more part time basis.

The Experience of Women in Ministry in Ireland

The Findings:

All of the women feel happy to be in Christian ministry and none expressed any regret about ministry as their life choice. They feel privileged to serve God and the people in their care. They are sustained by prayer, scripture, worship, family and friends. Where a small number of ministers say they intend to leave their current roles this is because of the circumstances rather than a doubt as to their desire to minister.

All of the women identify a strong sense of being called to ministry. These range from physical and spiritual experiences to a gradual sense of it 'being right.'

A significant minority, 30%, of participants say that gender has not negatively impacted their life or work, while the majority report elements of how gender is dealt

¹ Statistics have been gathered from the Christian churches and agencies where available. Where these were not available from the Catholic Church I have made an educated guess using averages from available information on diocesan websites. I have allowed for seven Catholic female ministers per diocese (26 dioceses).

with in the churches as challenging or seriously challenging to their flourishing in ministry. Most respondents hold the view that gender should not be a defining element in Christian ministry. The great majority of the gender related comments are rooted in an external gendering of the context. This may suggest that ministry itself is not gendered unless the context is intentionally gendered.

While there are many ministerial experiences in common, denomination is a defining aspect of ministry for women when it comes to gender. Similar responses emerged from respondents across the denominations which embrace equal access to all ministries, but there is evidence that where this is not the case, women in ministry face particular challenges. The majority of Catholic women express the view that there is systemic sexism or misogyny in the Church. Some Presbyterian women feel that Church leaders whose theology leads them to opposition of the ordination of women wish to reverse the decision to ordain women in the Presbyterian Church in Ireland. While this does not greatly affect their day to day ministry, it is currently affecting their experience of ministry in the context of their tradition.

Future Research Indicated by This Study

This research may lead to a variety of further investigations. There are four areas which may be particularly fruitful:

1. A Longitudinal Study for Female and Male Ministers

The findings of this study indicate that there would be significant value in conducting a longitudinal study among ministers across the Christian denominations in Ireland. Such a study would reveal how ministers perceive and experience their ministry. This may inform future planning for churches around training and formation; ecclesial structures; personal wellbeing of ministers and ecumenical co-operation among other areas.

2. Models and Theologies of Ministry

Participants of this study proposed that they had inherited a 'male model of ministry.' This indicates investigation of what other models might be available, whether or how they are gendered, and how these might work out in ecclesial settings. Insights shared by respondents into their understandings and theologies of ministry indicate further exploration into operant theologies of ministry among ministers.

3. Flourishing among Female Ministers

Findings indicate areas where measures might be taken to encourage the flourishing of women in Christian ministry. These include theology, church structures and the domestic lives of ministers.

4. Ecumenical Insights

This study reveals significant commonality of experience, understanding and language among ministers from various Christian traditions in Ireland. A further exploration of this area may be beneficial to all churches in reflecting on potential co-operation with regard to ministerial formation, support, theological and pastoral development and other areas.

Part I

Introduction

The Christian ministry and leadership of women have been present in Ireland since the early times of Christianity. Now women's ministry exists throughout the Christian churches. Women are presbyters, rectors, elders and deacons in many churches. There is a female bishop in the Church of Ireland. Female ministers work in various ministries including music ministry; social and pastoral ministries; youth and family ministry; spiritual accompaniment; liturgy and worship; missionary work; diocesan leadership roles; education; retreat ministry and many others.

Why Research Women in Ministry in Ireland?

My experience as a woman engaged in Christian ministry; my pastoral and educational interaction with ministry students across the denominations, and my relationships with colleagues in ministry in Ireland informally and through my supervision work have given me a profound awareness of the variety of ways people experience Christian ministry and its contexts. It is clear that each minister deals with a wide range of factors in negotiating the tasks and demands of this work, physically, mentally, spiritually, socially and emotionally and this in turn shapes ministry and also church communities.

The ministry of women has been seen as controversial and 'other' in the Christian churches and yet female ministers are an under-researched group. At this time women are neither fully integrated into ministry structures nor fully excluded. Whatever their personal gifts, calling or ambitions they are each managing the factor of being a woman as it is seen in their circumstances. It is timely then to enquire into their experience of ministry. Throughout my ministry, female colleagues and students have always been generous in sharing their journey with me. I am well placed to offer this research in service of women in ministry both to acknowledge

and honour their stories and to record them at a sensitive time in the development of women's ministry in Ireland.

Why Ecumenical?

Coming from the Catholic tradition it is clear that women in ministry face a particular set of challenges. In my training role I have had many conversations with ministers and ministers-in-training from a range of Christian denominations about their experience as women. Many explained that, whether or not their tradition encouraged women's leadership, they felt there were differences and sometimes obstacles which faced women in ministry. There was a particular issue around theological approaches to gender operant in churches. They felt an affinity with Catholic female ministers despite the difference in their ecclesial status and opportunities. I chose to conduct research among women who minister not just by denomination but across the denominational boundaries. Here areas of commonality might emerge, as well as difference among female ministers.

Another reason for an ecumenical approach is Ireland's sectarian past. Doing this research across the church traditions may, in a small way, undermine sectarian thinking. While I was prepared for some of the research results to indicate denominational differences, and indeed they do, I did not want to pre-empt this by separating out the women by denomination as part of the methodology. It is clear from the results that women in ministry have much in common even acknowledging differences in tradition, culture or geography.

The Researcher

I come from thirty years in theology and ministry in the Catholic context. The first ten years were spent in diocesan work in England and were followed by twenty years in Ireland, mostly in the area of adult faith formation. These were followed by two years' as a Director of Pastoral Studies at the Margaret Beaufort Institute of Theology, which focuses on theological education of women and which is the Catholic House of the ecumenical Cambridge Theological Federation. I currently continue part time with the Institute where I am visiting lecturer, and supervise

Masters and Doctoral students, and in consultancy with Christian churches and missions. My own PhD work proposed Relational Pneumatology as a foundation for the ministry of Adult Faith Formation and I conducted qualitative research with participants in the Catholic Diocese of Cork and Ross. My theological interests lie with both Constructive and Pastoral theologies. I am committed to ecumenism and relational ecclesial models.

Existing Research

There is no existing research on women in ministry in Ireland which investigates this experience across the churches. The bibliography includes sources which present research into Irish Catholic religious sisters (McKenna 2006); Evangelical women in Belfast (Baillie 2002); English Catholic priests (Fallon 2015) and clergy in the Church of England (*Living Ministry*, Church of England, 2017). The WATCH report focuses on appointments in the Church of England in 2016 (*Women and The Church* 2016); *Vocations Ireland* is currently conducting research with vocations directors from the various religious orders in Ireland and the findings are expected in December 2017. These projects, while illuminating the general area, do not specifically contribute to the aims of this study.

Limitations

This is an independent project and is therefore not led or funded by stake-holding institutions. This may enhance the clarity of perspective, and it also limits the ambitions of the project in terms of size, scope and access to participants.

This is not a comparative project. An exploration with a mixed group of female and male ministers would be of interest, but this is not within the remit of this study. As an independent project this study is also not focussed on enacting changes in the light of results. This report is freely offered as a contribution to stakeholders who may wish to consider its findings in their own contexts.

This Report

This report should be read as an indicative account of the research findings. As there was a strong overlap between data themes I have tried to arrange the results

in a way which is both faithful to the intention to the participants and coherent for the reader. In so doing I have given as much space as possible to the words of the women themselves. The task here is not primarily analytical but to work in service of the women and to enable their voices to be heard and their experience to be known.

Part I sets out the project and its parameters and Part II offers the findings and conclusions. Chapter 1 will offer a brief background and context to the project. Chapter 2 will set out an overview of the aims and methodology. Chapter 3 will offer the findings in themes: call, theology, nourishment, gender, denominational issues and hopes for the future. There will then be a conclusion and some reflection on areas which may fruitfully be explored in the light of the findings.

1. Background and Context

Christians in Ireland

The majority of people in Ireland are Christians. Taking the North and the Republic together the number of Christians to the nearest 100 is as follows²:

| Christian Denomination | Number of People |
|--------------------------------|-------------------------|
| Roman Catholic | 4,512,100 |
| Church of Ireland | 375,400 |
| Presbyterian Church of Ireland | 369,300 |
| Methodist Church of Ireland | 60,700 |
| Other Christian | 75,100 |

Christianity is deeply embedded in Ireland's history and culture, from the perception of the country as a 'land of saints and scholars,' to the sectarian troubles which have plagued relationships between Protestants and Catholics. Currently, although church attendance is falling across the island, the large majority of Irish people claim a Christian identity.

Ministry

The word 'ministry,' rooted in the Latin word *minister*, service, is understood in different ways historically and by women serving in ministries currently. It will be seen below that the involvement of women in Christian ministry can be traced back to the abbeys from the 5th century. It is almost certain that these women would not have described themselves as 'in ministry' as we might today. However their life of prayer, evangelisation and some service of the poor would contain the elements of modern understandings. Through the establishment of the apostolic religious congregations in the Catholic tradition and the advent of missionary and ecclesial initiatives in Protestant denominations the presence of women's ministry is more surely discernible. This study shows that in denominations where women are

² These statistics are taken from <https://faithsurvey.co.uk/irish-census.html> and <https://faithsurvey.co.uk/uk-christianity.html>

ordained their use of the word 'ministry,' or the phrase 'in (the) ministry,' is almost confined to ordained ministry or formal ministerial roles such as that of deaconess (Presbyterian). One woman from the Methodist tradition drew attention to this tendency and corrected it to include all ministries which take place within and without the Church setting. Catholic participants used the word more broadly with a more inclusive range of understandings, sometimes with prefixes such as 'ordained,' 'lay,' 'pastoral,' or 'liturgical.' The women in the study are self-defined as ministers but the broad understanding which emerges is that through their calling and in the context of their Christian communities they serve God's people in a variety of ways, including liturgical, social, spiritual and pastoral.

Controversial

Although women make up a majority of churchgoers in Ireland there is some controversy about their roles in leadership. In some denominations these are embedded in rules which limit women's involvement in some ministries. In others, even where restrictions are not present, women report differences in status and experience for women and men. Women are ministering at a time when their position as leaders is, in some contexts, contested in a way that the status of their male colleagues is not.

A Brief Background to Women's Ministry in Ireland

Female Religious Orders

Historically the Christian ministry of women was seen in the work of professed religious women (sisters). The first recorded women's monastery in Ireland was that founded by Brigid in the 5th century in Kildare and this was soon followed by many others. The way of life in the abbeys was focussed on prayer but also contained an element of service of the poor. There is also evidence that there were schools within the walls of the abbeys. They had abbesses and prioresses up to and throughout the medieval period, some of whom held influential positions in the Church.

The foundations of convents peaked around 1150. By the 14th century there were hospitals, particularly leper hospitals which were run by both women and men who

observed a religious rule. Most of the abbeys were devastated in the 16th century under the dissolution laws of Henry VIII and into the 17th century under Elizabeth I. Following this, new religious orders came to Ireland including the Poor Clares in 1629; the Dominicans in 1643; the Carmelites and Augustinians in around 1651 and the Benedictines around 1687.

Two significant Irish additions came in the 18th and 19th centuries with Nano Nagle and her Presentation Order (1775) and Catherine McCauley and her Mercy Order (1831). These focussed not on withdrawal and contemplative prayer only, but on the pastoral care of the sick and poor and the education of women and girls. The women in these congregations were active in social ministries which grew from their understanding of Christ and the gospel. A song of the time recounted Nano's ministry:

*Lanes her hem touched were cured of hopelessness
Her cloak was motherskirt that cuddled crowds,
And desert tent for hearts loveparched and stray.
Her lamp swung on a door to happiness..³*

The 19th and 20th centuries saw huge growth in the religious orders and their influence. The numbers of women in religious life rose from 120 in 1800 to 1,500 in 1851. There were 8000 sisters in Ireland in 1901. The post-independence census in 1926 recorded 9,564 female religious living in the twenty-six counties of the Free State. They made up 70% of those in religious profession. By the late 1960's the number increased to almost 15,500 on the island of Ireland⁴. It was estimated that a further 15,000 Irish nuns lived outside Ireland on the missions.

As the census in Ireland considers religious life to be an occupation in itself, and accords religious professional status, for much of the 20th century women religious formed the largest and most powerful group of professional women in Ireland.⁵

³ Jerome Kiely, cited Walsh, T.J., *Nano Nagle and the Presentation Sisters* (Dublin: Presentation, 1959), 88.

⁴ 'Survey of Catholic Clergy and Religious Personnel, 1971' carried out by the Research and Development Unit of the Catholic Communications Institute of Ireland and published in *Social Studies/Irish Journal of Sociology*, 1, 1 (1972),:137-234; the Census of Ireland 1926-1991; and the Catholic Directory 1922-2004. Cited in McKenna, Y., *Made Holy: Irish Women Religious at Home and Abroad*. (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2006).

⁵ McKenna, *Made Holy*, 1.

The numbers of those entering religious orders began to fall in the late 1960's but at the end of the 20th century there were still over 10,000 sisters living in Ireland and their influence was enormous in education, health and Church social initiatives.

Vatican II and Women's Ministry in the Catholic Church

The effect of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) on women and ministry in Ireland was twofold. The relaxation of rules for women in religious orders gave them freedom to pursue a greater variety of ministries. For lay women⁶ there was a renewed call to fully participate in the worship of the Church with the Mass newly translated into English and Irish. Further, there was a renewed theology of the laity which emphasised the role of lay people in many ministries in the Church and on its behalf in wider society⁷. This led to a proliferation and flourishing of lay involvement particularly between the mid-seventies and the mid-nineties and the development of courses which would train lay ministers to work alongside clergy⁸. Many of the Catholic participants in this study came into ministry during these years.

The Development of Women's Ministry in the Protestant Churches in Ireland

With the growth of Protestant churches in Ireland came expressions of women's ministry within churches, and in particularly in society.

After the famine Protestant women were involved in social outreach and the growing demand for women's suffrage. Belfast Presbyterian Isabella Tod founded the North of Ireland Women's Suffrage Society in 1872. Walsh notes the presence of Protestant female philanthropists in Dublin from the late 19th century⁹. This was understood as part of their Christian commitment and an extension of their domestic influence. It mirrored the work undertaken by female religious orders.

There was also significant activity and leadership among women in the area of foreign missions. This was exemplified by the Presbyterian Zenana Mission founded

⁶ Technically, professed women (sisters) are also 'lay' but in general usage 'lay' usually means neither ordained nor religiously professed.

⁷ For example see *Lumen Gentium* 12 and *Apostolicam Actuositatem* 10.

⁸ All Hallows College, Dublin was at the forefront of these initiatives and also Milltown Park, also in Dublin.

⁹ Walsh, O., 'Protestant Female Philanthropy in Dublin in the Early 20th Century,' in *20th-century / Contemporary History*, 5, no. 2 (Summer 1997).

in 1874 to send female teachers and medical workers to promote Christianity ‘among the women of the east¹⁰.’

Formal Christian ministry remained restricted to men in the Church of Ireland and Presbyterian Church but the establishment of the Salvation Army in 1865 opened preaching ministries to women. In 1880 four women under the command of Catherine Reynolds arrived in Belfast and within two years she and thirty-four other women had established fifteen congregations (corps) across the North of Ireland. Holmes observes that the primary motivation of Protestant women at this time was their ‘call’ to preach¹¹.

In the Church of Ireland women were active in voluntary and social organisations which raised funds; met local needs and supported foreign missions, and there was an increasing demand for enhanced roles within the Church. In 1914, a petition to include women in parochial offices was presented to the Church of Ireland and defeated. It claimed that women had been admitted to such roles pre-disestablishment in 1870. It was signed by 1,400 women. It was eventually passed in 1920. In 1929 Lord Glenavy proposed the inclusion of women on Diocesan and General Synods, and when defeated set up the ‘Church of Ireland League,’ to promote this cause. However, it was unsuccessful on two more attempts and women were not admitted to these roles until 1949. In 1969 there were still only eighteen women on the General Synod.

The Presbyterian Church voted for women elders in 1926 and rejected a call for women’s ordination soon after.

The Ordination of Women

While ministry is not synonymous with ordained ministry it is clearly a relevant factor. Some of the Protestant denominations in Ireland admit women to ordained ministry

¹⁰ For further information on the Zenana Mission see Myrtle Hill’s ‘Women’s Work for Women: The Irish Presbyterian Zenana Mission, 1874-1914,’ in Raughter, R. ed. *Religious Women and their History: Breaking the Silence* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2005).

¹¹ Holmes, J. ‘Women Preachers in the Protestant Churches,’ in Gilley, S. & Stanley, B. eds. *The Cambridge History of Christianity c1815-1914 Vol 8*, (Cambridge: CUP, 2014).

and others do not. The Moravian Church historically supported the strong participation of women and from the eighteenth century they occupied roles as deaconesses, elders and, briefly, as presbyters (though there was then a gap 1790-1967); and women have always held equal status in the Salvation Army. For the other denominations women's ordination is a relatively recent development. The Presbyterian Church in Ireland ordained its first woman, Ruth Patterson in 1976; the Methodist Church in Ireland ordained Ellen Whalley in 1978 and the Church of Ireland ordained Irene Templeton and Kathleen Young in 1990.

Theological Perspectives on Women in Ministry

Here I will summarise very briefly some of the operant perspectives which form a context for the ministry of women in Ireland at this time. Some of these affect some denominations more than others, but I propose that all of them form part of the tradition for all of the women. The inclusion of this short summary will offer a context for the remarks of some participants about the theological milieu in which they minister.

Scripture

An important text which is cited in the argument against women's ministry is Genesis 2 which depicts the infidelity of Eve at the fall. Baillie observes that the vulnerability of Eve and her deception has led churches to deem women unfit for leadership¹².

In 1 Cor 11:2-16 Paul writes 'Christ is the head of every man, and the husband is the head of his wife, and God is the head of Christ.' He exhorts women to keep their heads covered during worship. In 1 Cor 14:34-35 he writes:

...women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak but should be subordinate, as the law also says.³⁵ If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church.

¹² Baillie, S., *Evangelical Women in Belfast: Imprisoned or Empowered?* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 75.

This is supported by Ephesians 5:22-24 in which wives are instructed to be subject to their husbands who are the 'head' as Christ is head of the Church. In 1 Tim 2:11-15, a later epistle, the author writes:

Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. ¹² I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent. ¹³ For Adam was formed first, then Eve; ¹⁴ and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. ¹⁵ Yet she will be saved through childbearing, provided they continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty.

In evangelical traditions these texts provide the main argument against women's leadership. Participants abbreviate this perspective with the word 'headship.'

Those who are in favour of women's ministry also consider scripture important to their position and particularly cite Galatians 3:28 'In Christ there is no male nor female.' They cite the praxis of Jesus as more inclusive of women than the contemporary culture, and the entrusting of the news of Christ's resurrection to women. They highlight the counter-cultural role of female leaders in the early Church such as Phoebe, Priscilla and Junia. These views are supported and resourced by feminist theologies and histories¹³.

Complementarianism

Complementarianism is the theological view that although women and men are equally valued by God, they are created different to one another and their roles in life are equal but complementary.

In the Catholic tradition it is possible to trace the developments in this theology through its documents. As the Church came to terms with the feminist movement there was an increasing support for the equality of women in the workforce and society, while keeping a particular role for women in the home and family¹⁴. O'Brien writes of:

¹³For example, Schussler-Fiorenza, E. *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*, (London: SCM, 1983); Malone, M. T., *Women and Christianity*, vols 1-3, (Dublin: Columba, 2001-2003).

¹⁴ *Rerum Novarum* (Leo XIII, 1891) placed the woman primarily in the home; *The Dignity of Women* (Pius XII, 1957) affirmed complementarity:

an uneven but noticeable progression from initial reservations and resistance towards increasingly active promotion for the equal involvement of women with men in all dimensions of society: access to opportunities for work, protection from violence and other exploitation, political participation and the shaping of culture. Simultaneously, the church insisted that women fulfil what it presents as their distinctive and vital role in the home, especially in the rearing of children, with an analogous form of participation in society. This vocation has been continually presented in terms of 'complementarity': the anthropological and theological conviction that women and men, while equal in dignity before God, have qualities and functions rooted in their natures that complement one another.

In addition, in Catholic Church teaching, there is the view from the perspective of sacramental theology that because Jesus was a man, women cannot be ordained as priests. This view was reinforced by John Paul II in 1994 with *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*. Here he states that Christ's choice of twelve men was a 'free and sovereign act' and should not be interpreted as cultural conformity. The Eucharist was instituted by Christ in explicit connection to the priestly service of the Twelve. This

...expresses the redemptive act of Christ the Bridegroom toward the Church the Bride. This is clear and unambiguous when the sacramental ministry of the Eucharist, in which the priest acts '*in persona Christi*,' is performed by a man. (26)

The Protestant understanding of women and men as equal but different rests on scriptural interpretation. It is associated particularly with more evangelical sections of the Church whose relationship with scripture tends toward a more literal understanding. This is manifested in all areas of Christian living but especially in marriage and family and in Church leadership¹⁵.

Egalitarianism

Egalitarians propose that women and men are created equal and are called to ministry according to their gifts and not according to gender. This position

...we have the absolute equality in personal and fundamental values, but different functions which are complementary and superbly equivalent and from them arise the various rights and duties of the one and the other (370).

Octogesima Adveniens, (Paul VI, 1971), speaks of avoiding a 'false equality.' The key modern document on women is *Mulieris Dignitatem* (John Paul II, 1988) which gives a full presentation of complementarity in the Catholic canon.

¹⁵ For an exposition of this perspective please see Brand, N. *Complementarian Spirituality: Reformed Women and Union with Christ* (Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2013)

acknowledges differences between the sexes but does not accept that the results of these differences should be hierarchical or should privilege one over the other. This view is supported by feminist theologians and those who campaign for women's equality across the churches. This view is often pitted against complementarianism as an opposite, particularly in the Protestant Evangelical traditions, however, as Stackhouse points out, these views are not mutually exclusive¹⁶.

Deacons and Deaconesses

The title of *diakonos* or deacon is used of women in the New Testament. At the beginning of Romans 16 Paul recommends a Phoebe who is deacon of the church in Cenchreae and a benefactor 'of many people including me.' In 1 Timothy (3:8-11) there is an exhortation to female deacons to be 'worthy of respect, not malicious talkers but temperate and trustworthy in everything.' In the early centuries of Christianity there is evidence that, while women's ministry became less prevalent, the female diaconate remained present in different parts of the Christian world, to the sixth century in the Eastern Church and in the West possibly until around the eleventh or twelfth centuries. There is also evidence of ordination ceremonies for female deacons from the 8th century.¹⁷

This ministry is now present in various Christian traditions. In the Catholic Church it is an ordained ministry reserved to men (either in permanent or transitional diaconate), and in the Presbyterian Church in Ireland it is entitled 'deaconess,' and reserved to women. The Church of Ireland ordains ministers as deacons 'on the way' to priestly ordination but, unlike the Church of England, does not have a permanent diaconate. In all traditions it is seen as differing in nature and function to the ordained priesthood. Pope Francis has recently established an advisory group to consider the role of the diaconate and specifically admitting women to the diaconate.

Lay ministry

Each of the Irish Christian traditions has an understanding that Christian faith is connected to both a way of life and service of others. The taking up of service in the

¹⁶ Stackhouse J., *Partners in Christ: A Conservative Case for Egalitarianism*, (Ill: Intervarsity Press, 2015), 15.

¹⁷ An illuminating history is offered in Osiek, C., Macdonald, M, Tulloch, J. *A Woman's Place: House Churches in Earliest Christianity*, (Minneapolis: Fortress 2005) or Zagano, P. *Women Deacons: Past, Present, Future*, (NY: Paulist, 2011).

Church and community is understood as lay ministry. This is seen as a biblical mandate. In the Catholic tradition it is supported by documents such as *Christifidelis Laici* (1988) and many others. In all of the traditions where there is a reduction in the number of people coming forward for ordained ministry there is a renewal of understanding and encouragement for lay ministries.

Statistics

Statistics are largely available where women occupy formal positions, particularly in ordained ministries. Where their ministries are less formal and not ordained these numbers tend not to be held centrally by the churches. In the Catholic Church this accounts for all of women's ministries and in other churches for a portion of them. Where churches made statistics available some also highlighted these less formal areas where there was a presence of women in ministry but which was not part of their data. This raises the question of whether women count if they are not counted. The table below represents available data rather than comparable data across the churches.

Table 2: Statistics other than Roman Catholic: Women by denomination, order or ministry.¹⁸

| Denomination | Order or Ministry | Number of Women |
|---------------------|--------------------------|------------------------|
| Church of Ireland | Bishop | 1 |
| | Chaplain | 2 |
| | Clergy | 79 |
| | Non-Stipendiary Minister | 31 |
| | Diocesan Youth Worker | 6 |

¹⁸ Some of these may represent women for whom ministry is not their main life choice but an additional commitment. In some Church of Ireland positions a Youth Ministry role may be combined with a Family Ministry role. This is not entirely clear and may not be a helpful distinction to the women themselves so I have kept these statistics as I received them to contribute to the overall picture of women in ministries in the churches. The Catholic Church is treated separately as no statistics were made available by the Irish Bishops' Conference; the Association of Major Religious in Ireland or Vocations Ireland so there is less clarity about these numbers. Statistics were also unavailable from Pentecostal churches; the Lutheran Church and the Association of Baptist Churches in Ireland.

| | | |
|--------------------------------|--|---------------------------|
| | Parish Youth Worker | 23 |
| Presbyterian Church of Ireland | Ordained Minister | 21 |
| | Licentiate | 2 |
| | Deaconess | 18 |
| | Probationer Deaconess | 2 |
| | Auxiliary Minister | 6 |
| | Accredited Preacher | 67 |
| | Elders and other voluntary ministries with family, young people etc. | Statistics not available. |
| Methodist Church of Ireland | Ordained Minister | 22 |
| | Probationer Minister awaiting ordination | 5 |
| | Registered lay minister | 12 |
| Salvation Army | Officers | 20 |
| Moravian | Ordained Minister | 1 |

There are approximately 400 women ministering in Ireland as their main life choice. This includes women who are ordained as priests; deaconesses; women in parish, social, family and youth ministries, diocesan advisors and religious sisters. I base this estimate on the statistics received from the Christian churches and estimation of women in Catholic ministries by diocese. The ordained and non-ordained group falls mostly into categories of Christian other than Catholic, and Catholic, but there are also women ministering who are not ordained in all of the other traditions.

Geography

The Christian tradition in Ireland has a very particular story. The religious landscape in the North of Ireland is different but deeply connected to that in the Republic. The denominations operate on an all-Ireland basis and have the same principles, beliefs and liturgical life north and south. Both the North and the Republic have been affected by sectarianism and a pattern of associating ecclesial belonging with political affiliation and cultural identity. Clearly this has been more strongly

experienced in the North, where a diversity of Christian affiliations coupled with The Troubles has led to bloody conflict along Christian religious lines. This history means that Christianity in Ireland is never free of a political nuance and care is needed to acknowledge and respect differences and a painful past when trying also to work ecumenically¹⁹. The timing of this research coincides with the observation of the centenaries of important moments in Irish history 1912-1922, and many of these are related to the different Christian communities. These themes did not emerge strongly from the research participants but there were some comments about the differences between the experience of ministry in the contexts of North and South.

¹⁹ The *Ethical and Shared Remembering Programme* offers insights into this balance www.thejunction-ni.org

2. The Women in Ministry in Ireland Project

Questions

The WMI project began with simple questions. What is it like to minister as a woman in Ireland at this time? What are the joys and challenges? Is it different in different denominations; in geographical regions and for those who are ordained or not? Does it matter in ministry at this time whether the minister is male or female? What issues are most important to women who minister in Ireland in 2017? The key research question to women is *what is your experience as a female minister at this time?*

Aim and Contribution

The aim of this research is to begin to explore the experience of women in ministry in Ireland and to identify the issues which are important to participants. The contribution of this study is primarily an insight into this experience. It is also possible to draw conclusions from this data about how women's ministry might be encouraged and supported both in their own traditions and ecumenically.

This data also offers insights into how these women understand and practice ministry and it is possible to discern areas where alternative models of ministry may emerge in the light of their experience and reflection.

This project sets itself within the category of Practical Theology²⁰. It is an enquiry into human experience in the context of Christian ministry which leads to theological exploration and potential ecclesial reframing.

²⁰ It can be understood in terms of the tasks of Practical Theology proposed by Osmer: descriptive-empirical, interpretive, normative, pragmatic. Osmer, F. *Practical theology: An introduction* (Michigan: W. B. Eerdmans, 2008). It contains the key element of reflexive practice in the encounters with women and subsequent interpretation of data.

Given that this is the first research of its kind in Ireland, I hope that these findings will contribute to understanding of women's Christian ministry and set the scene for further research in this area.

The Scope of the Project

This project initially has two phases: a questionnaire followed by a series of interviews with a smaller number of women. These interviews fall into two categories. Thirteen were anonymous interviews with practitioners, and the remaining five were with women, also practitioners, who for various reasons have found themselves in the headlines of women's ministry in Ireland – perhaps as the first in particular respects or as campaigners or leaders. For the purposes of this initial report the data from these eighteen interviews will be taken together, though the content of the second group of interviews will not be quoted. This report comes at the completion of these two phases.

A third phase, to take place in 2018, will involve a gathering of women in Christian ministry who will discuss the findings of phases one and two. In the final publication the research findings, the fruits of this discussion and the interviews with these five women will be presented separately.

Anonymity and Confidentiality

All of the women ministering in Ireland are doing so as members of minorities in their particular traditions. In some cases they are ministering as members of very small minorities. For this reason if I were to name the specific denominations which are represented by participants this may compromise their anonymity. Although participants have been very open and honest and shared very personal aspects of their own stories, these have had to be anonymised, and in some cases cannot be shared. I have done my best to convey the content of what participants have shared without compromising their anonymity. In some studies it is possible to give participants a pseudonym or number so that their contribution can be mapped across the various themes. In this study that is not possible as connecting their comments in this way would probably identify respondents. The publication of the interviews

with five women in more public roles in the fuller presentation of the research will give a greater insight into how the ministry has been experienced in particular life contexts.

Methodology

A Qualitative Focus

The aim of this study is primarily qualitative. The philosophy is twofold. Firstly this is an enquiry into experience with an under-researched group. This indicates an interpretative and mixed method approach which strongly emphasises the qualitative data. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis rests on a 'curious facilitation' of participants in sharing their experience²¹. I have adopted this experience-centred approach in conducting this research though without the entire method of data analysis proposed in this method.

Secondly it is appropriate that the philosophy of methodology reflects the aims and context of the research. As this study has been conducted in a Christian ecclesial and ministerial context I have adopted a theological and ministerial posture of *loving service*. It is my intention in conducting this research to be of some service to the participants and to the churches. The concept of *loving service* is a simple reflection of the ministerial philosophy of the Christian Church found in the *Mandatum* of Jesus in John's (13:15) 'that you also should do as I have done to you.' This is coherent with the emancipatory research model paradigm which seeks to facilitate the empowerment of participants²².

I conduct this research both as an 'insider' and an 'outsider'²³. I am a woman engaged in Christian ministry as my main life choice and share many of the faith perspectives and experiences of the participants. However I do not share their

²¹ IPA researchers try to understand what an experience (object or an event) is like from the participant's perspective. Yet, at the same time, they try to formulate critical questions referring to the material..' Pietkiewicz, I., & Smith, J., 'A Practical Guide to using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis in Qualitative Research Psychology,' *Psychological Journal* 18, (2012), 2-3.

²² This originated in disability research. See Oliver M. 'Changing the Social Relations of Research Production,' in *Disability, Handicap, & Society*, 7 no 2 (1992): 110-111.

²³ For a discussion on insider/outsider research see Jarvis, P. *The Practitioner--Researcher: Developing Theory from Practice*. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc., 1999).

experience, for example, where they are ministers in Protestant traditions or Catholic religious sisters; are Irish-born, nor in the variety of different ministries in which they serve. I do not assume that all of the participants would see me as 'inside' their immediate colleague group or ministerial experience.

Given that I am the investigator in this research project, and therefore have influence in the reporting and interpretation of data, I have chosen not to include my own experiences and views as a participant. While I acknowledge my own presence in conducting the study I do not wish to allow the possibility that it would become a vehicle for my own views or agenda.

In terms of denomination very few participants who did not already know me enquired as to my own ecclesial affiliation. At no stage did anyone express a view that my background was an obstacle. Two Catholic women expressed the view that my background may have been an advantage when interviewing Catholic women but mostly my affiliation did not come up and seemed to be of no interest to participants.

Conducting the Research

Dr Nicola Brady at the Irish Council of Churches (ICC) and Inter Church Meeting kindly offered to facilitate the distribution of questionnaires through all members²⁴. I created a Facebook page to publicise the questionnaire and tweeted the link and the request at intervals. I further sent a note to thirty personal contacts asking them to complete and also send on the questionnaire to their contacts. In addition I contacted six Catholic religious congregations; the women's representative of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland and four churches which are not affiliated to the Irish Council of Churches. For the second phase of interviews with women in more public roles I personally contacted participants to ask them to participate because of their positions and to include women from the different Christian denominations. The questionnaire²⁵ was made available February 14th- September 30th and the interviews were conducted between July 6th and September 29th 2017. Over this

²⁴ In fact due to an administrative oversight the document was not distributed to the representatives of the Inter Church Meeting.

²⁵ Attached as Appendix 1.

period I received twenty-two questionnaire responses and conducted eighteen interviews.

Cohort

The result of this was a wide distribution across a variety of Christian denominations. The women who responded had been involved in ministry from four days to sixty years. They were from the four largest church traditions on the island: Catholic, Church of Ireland, Methodist Church and Presbyterian Church of Ireland and from several other Christian denominations. A small minority were ministering in non-denominational settings. They were married, single, in relationships or in vows as members of religious congregations (sisters). Some were mothers, step-mothers and grandmothers.

Eleven of the questionnaire respondents were known to me personally. Eleven responded to the distribution of questionnaires from their churches or received it from a colleague who had passed it on having completed it themselves.

For the interview group I contacted a selection of the women who had filled in the questionnaires. This selection was made from those who had indicated their willingness to contribute further, and then in terms of diversity so that the interviews would reflect the Christian denominations and the variety of ministries indicated in the questionnaires. For reasons of anonymity these cannot be detailed but while there were not participants from every Christian denomination in Ireland or every kind of ministry in each tradition, the four historical denominations of Catholic, Church of Ireland, Methodist and Presbyterian Church in Ireland were represented and several other denominations also.

Finally, I invited anyone else who might like to participate in interview by Facebook and Twitter. Three further people were interviewed as a result of this invitation. For the five other interviews I contacted women whose ministry had for various reasons raised public interest. For the purpose of this report I have included their general data without quoting them.

Data

Because my aim was to enquire into the experience of women in ministry, the data I collected regarding their circumstances served this primary goal. The deeper questions about faith, calling and theology belonged in an interview setting but I left the questionnaire categories as open as possible so that women could include as much of that as they wished, and many did. For this reason the questionnaires contain a significant amount of qualitative data as well as the quantitative results.

The interviews took the form of a semi structured interview. There was no time limit and interviews took between twenty minutes and seventy eight minutes. In all I recorded one thousand and eight minutes of interview.

In processing the data I employed an immersive and reflexive approach, reading and re-reading the questionnaires; typing the transcripts, and allowing themes and questions to emerge and to produce the thematic presentation below.

Findings

The findings set out in this report are intended to indicate key findings and areas of interest.

As the research is qualitative the findings here will be presented in themes which emerged from the questionnaire and interviews. This will be done predominantly through the words of the women themselves.

Given the primary aims of this study I have not included analysis with the findings but return to the significant questions in my conclusion.

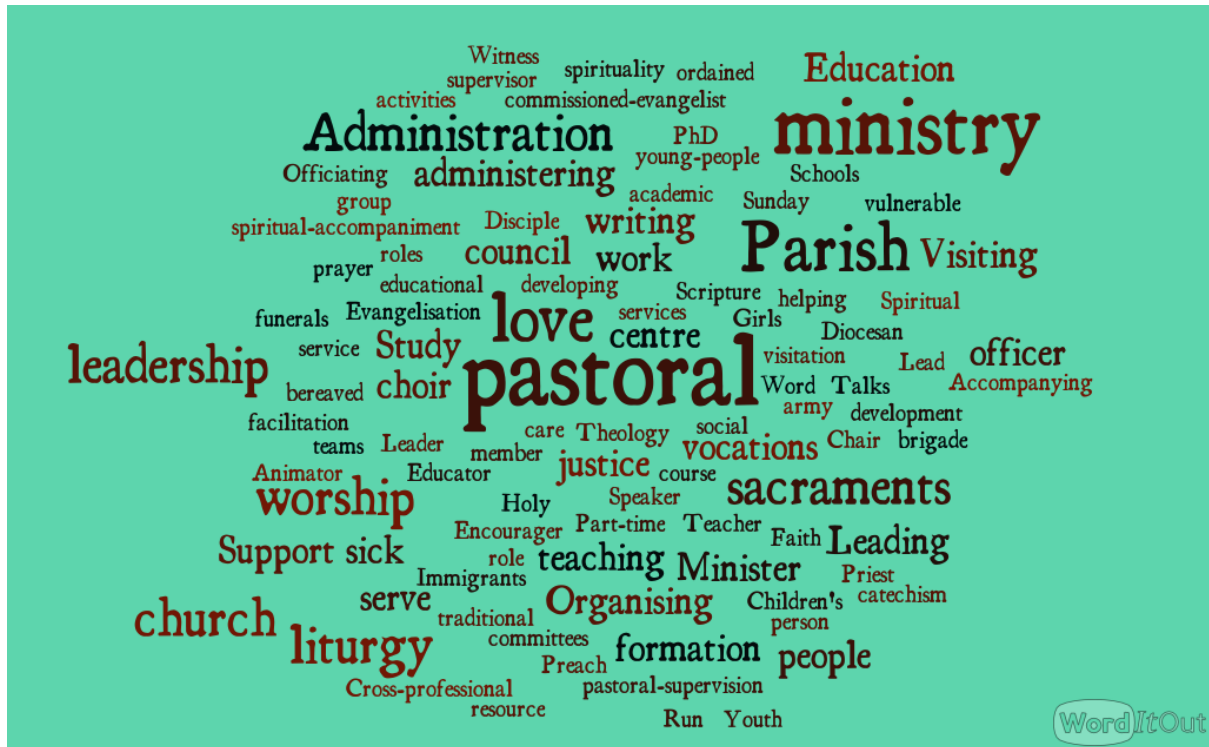
Part II: Findings

3. The Experience of Women in Ministry in Ireland

Context

The Work.

Participants listed a wide range of work and activities. Those in ordained ministry included the leading of worship, administering of sacraments, preaching, church leadership (committees etc.) administration, pastoral visitation and other traditional roles. Many respondents described themselves as having an educational or teaching role and for some this was the main part of their role. Others worked in of particular aspect of ministry, such as liturgy, worship, spiritual accompaniment, or social justice. Most of their work included an element of administration and a small number indicated some frustration with this. Some mentioned that they were engaged in academic study while also carrying out their ministry. Others had an academic teaching role in addition to their ministry. Two indicated that they were involved in supporting the ministry of others through pastoral supervision. I include a word cloud of these responses here:



Circumstances of Ministry.

Here women were asked in the questionnaire whether they were ordained; were they paid; did they have a formal contract and other benefits. These questions were asked in order to gain a sense of where women were finding their place and whether they felt satisfied with it. Some of the interview conversations also yielded data in this area.

Some women were in ordained non-stipendiary ministry and therefore received no salary but some received expenses. Most others received remuneration for their work either through a formal contract or the terms of their ordained service. A minority of others, religious sisters and retired ministers, did not receive financial recompense for their work.

Some women in the Catholic Church were working in ministry on a verbal understanding with priests but expressed concern about what would happen if changes occurred. Others, also in the Catholic tradition, said they had been employed on a series of short term contracts which was unsatisfactory in terms of

financial security and planning. A minority of Catholic women identified low pay as an obstacle to their participation in ministry.

Emerging Themes

Here I have identified the prevalent themes in the questionnaire responses and the interviews. I introduce each with some context and then select direct quotations from participants to illustrate each.

1. Call: *An Inward Impression on the Soul*²⁶.

This theme was the most consistent and prevalent among the responses. It arose mostly in response to questions about what drew women into ministry and what now sustains them during challenging times.

Women described a key moment when they understood that they were being called by God to ministry. For many this was as part of a general process of responding to God's call more generally and for some it was more an 'out of the blue,' experience. Here women realised that God was calling them to ministry came in a variety of ways.

Asking them to make a change:

...that I suddenly realised that while I had a permanent pensionable job in my day to day life to actually do something more with my faith, and to help people more.

In prayer

we just prayed and something happened in the Lord. We didn't know what it was but I realised that whatever is going on God is certainly up to something. He's calling me to step out and go there. And I said 'ok.' ...Because I knew this was rooted in the Lord.

Unexpectedly:

I can vividly remember coming down the spiral staircase from the little chapel and just having this real sense of God calling me into full time Christian ministry.

²⁶ Wesley, J. Sermon xi, The Witness of the Spirit. (1872) <http://www.umcmission.org/Find-Resources/John-Wesley-Sermons/Sermon-11-The-Witness-of-the-Spirit-II> (accessed, 16/11/17).

and I remember just sitting up straight.. and going 'this is it,' you know, 'this is it.'

As a physical sensation:

I...woke up with a voice calling my name and was shaken. Literally shoulder shaken, nobody there, and I got up and walked to the sanctuary which I had never been in to in my life before, and I turned around and realised where I was meant to be.

...it was as if someone had got hold of my right shoulder and said 'no you need to pay attention to this.'

They said it's time to pray with N and the pain switched off just like that. So that was the Lord saying 'that's the way you go.' I said, 'that's the way I go.' ..I knew the path of ministry was being shown me.

Some women disclosed their call to discover that other people had already understood that they were called to ministry:

..they gathered round and they could see on my face and I said 'I'm meant to be a priest.' 'O glory be' they said, 'we thought we were going to have to tell you.'

I told my husband what I was going to do before I went down to the rector and he said to me 'I've been waiting for a year for you to say this.'

As well as these experiences women spoke about the call to ministry as suiting their nature and experience. It was a process of discernment which acknowledged their existing preferences and direction in life. Through questioning and testing they eventually became sure of their calling:

I loved leading prayer, I loved being with people – and it just made sense.

I always felt I was called to be a sister. Since I was quite small. I don't remember when it started but I always knew that's what God wanted..

It was just ordinary, and bit by bit the door inside my heart was opening and it seemed right and I was accepted.

It was just a dawning I think, a realisation. I prayed a lot about it, from the glimmering, it's like when you have a thought and everything kind of coalesces on it. It was like every hymn was speaking directly to me and every bible reading it was all 'who shall I call?' It was all Isaiah left and centre,

and you know the deer pants for the water. It was everything seemed to be hammering home – ‘yes thicko it is you I’m calling! Off you go.’

A noticeable aspect of being called and a continuing sense of vocation was how strong and compelling it was. Women felt ‘pursued’ and ‘had no peace’ until they responded. Sometimes they heard themselves say things which they hadn’t planned to say or had even thought beforehand.

..I hadn’t premeditated these words and I said ‘I think God wants me to be a nun.’ And as soon as I’d said it I wanted my tongue cut out...inside I had, my heart was pounding and it wouldn’t go away all that evening so I bargained with God...every single day it was with me. I could not get away from it.

And I heard myself say to my boss one day ‘well if I have to choose between studying theology and this job I know what my choice is going to be.’ I was trying not to show it on my face but I was thinking ‘who said that?’

A prevalent image in this respect was that of the doors opening. This image was used by participants both in terms of their overall calling and also as a way of testing whether it was ‘right’ for them to pursue it. If the doors opened they could feel sure that God was behind their decision.

The door was always open. I never had any setbacks or anything.

If it’s not meant to be then the doors won’t open but if it is meant to be then they will... I just knew that the doors would open. And it would just happen.

So I just think God has worked my life with all these little kind of doors without me even trying.

Then I turned and walked back. And I possibly did that 2 or 3 times and I eventually decided I would go into (*the theological college*). And...the college is locked during the holiday and if the door is closed you might have to ring a buzzer and I would have turned and walked away. But it so happened that someone was coming out and held the door open for me. And I went in...

For some respondents the call to ministry came with their conversion to Christian faith – or a deepening of an existing faith.

I was led to make the decision about surrendering my life to God, as in letting go of my driving the wheel, even though I thought God was doing it but actually it was me driving a lot of it. And letting go in a very very deep way.

And a challenge to me to look at myself in a different light and to understand what my relationship between my faith and my relationship with my Church was.

This was a work of the Spirit and I was growing in a relationship with Jesus apace, more than I had ever done. I felt that was right. I felt that was right.

For many participants the call was the sustaining factor that would keep them going in times of challenge. Even when times became difficult; even when other people challenged their participation in ministry; even when there appeared to be no place for them, their sense of God's abiding call meant that they continued against the odds.

The light wouldn't go out... I could feel I was called to ordination and it wouldn't go away.

The sense of 'knowing' that this is what God requires of me and being 'peaceful' with that despite the levels of difficulty even 'angry disappointment' that there are in the Church and the sense in which so many fell 'let down'..

...if you believe that this is what God's calling you to and where he wants you to be then even though sometimes it's difficult, you accept it.

Sometimes I think a different answer would be less traumatic, less painful, but (*hesitates*) it's - you can't make up truth, do you know what I mean? So sometimes I wouldn't mind if I could find a different answer but I can't and I can't make something else be this. Does that make sense? So therefore I'm stuck with it or it's stuck with me (*laughs*). A lot of the time just a sense of - yes maybe you know this is the only way I can live this life, no matter how many other ways I'd prefer to live it.

While called to ministry some women felt that a particular role was indicated. They felt attracted to parish ministry or the missions; pastoral care, youth or preaching.

A kind of feeling that I should be doing something about social things really...

Well I immediately knew I wanted to be a priest. I never felt drawn to lay ministry. I liked and wanted the sacramental side.

It was definitely parish ministry...I like the parish life. I like that there's old people and young people and sick people, and well people.

..that when I first encountered God the sense was 'God I want to tell others about this!' And that's not to say that contemplative life isn't, you know, ministerial, but it was the sense of, it was the sense of excitement and joy of - I hadn't heard this before this...I owe it to others to tell it.

Some women spoke with hindsight and humour about how they see this call now:

My faith and the belief that I'm doing what I've been called to do and I was called to do it therefore it, you know, it's my duty, my privilege to do it.

You always think you're going to change the world. You always think you're going to be the saviour of the Church; you're going to be the greatest pastor, the greatest evangelist, the greatest bible teacher!

I thought that someone would take me aside and say to me that this is not actually the path for you, think of something else. And so at all stages going through I have expected someone to say 'get a grip!'

2. Purpose and Theology of Ministry '*Drawn into fullness of life.*'

Women were not specifically asked about their theology of ministry in the questionnaire or during the interview but many spoke of how they understand their role. This came across in reflecting on their story and how they see their lives and what they do.

Many participants understand ministry essentially as doing God's work: that they are called to participate in this and that they will be empowered so to do. There is very little evidence of ego in this theology and it indicates an accompanying spirituality of trust and abandonment.

Because it's the Kingdom. It's the upside-down kingdom and I think we're not good at that. It has to be my faith in God. And God does this because it's not me. I don't have that strength on my own.

I suppose that all of us, all Christians together and no matter what denomination we're in could better reflect the life of Jesus Christ. And that his acceptance and his inclusion of people that were marginalised and his peace and his grace – that we could reflect that better.

Some respondents emphasised the sharing of the Gospel message or God's love as central to ministry. They wanted to encourage others to have a relationship with Jesus.

I had a passion to bring other people to Christ and to have that personal relationship with him.

Being a translator from my experience of divine love into languages that connect with peoples' experiences. Being part of moments where together we can create a context/space where we can experience the Divine at work and loving us. It's about awareness & awakening to Presence.

I also feel that I'm helping to hand on the faith, to keep the faith alive and to help hand it on again.

Meeting people, relating to them and being able to bring God's love into their lives and situation.

Pastoral care was a key theme in the understanding of ministry. Participants highlighted their role in being 'there' for people, particularly those experiencing troubles.

It would have been to be in places where people had nothing and to be with them and to bring about a good quality of life.

...anybody who wants to find me knows where I am. So I think that's just the ministry of being, just to be there.

You know, it's a great privilege to be with people who are dying, and people who are very ill, and who ask for you to be there.

Respondents acknowledge that their experience of ministry has brought spiritual growth and development.

And I'm just so glad that God gave me all those experiences including the hard ones and the grief, that enabled me to be who I am today in ministry.

I think all of us are called into mysticism...you know that's all our story but it's being able to be aware of it to be highlighted.

But I could just talk to Jesus like he's just sitting there and I'd be giving out and I'd be saying why don't you just show me what to do and, sometimes I don't think I'm doing the right thing, but it's peaceful so I feel like there's that gift of assurance, yes.

(Ministry) pushes me in a good way to develop my relationship with the Lord, makes me more attentive to my prayer life.

There has been some movement among the women between denominations; from religious life to lay life and from lay ministry to ordained ministry. This is what some said about their vocation in terms of being ordained or not.

I'd have a big thing about the distinction between vocation and ministry, that the vocation is our whole self – who am I called to be – and particularly in our ministries. The particular ministry is for a particular time you're in a particular role in a particular place.

My ministry is exactly the same. I guess the only thing that has changed is that I usually if I'm out and about I wear a collar and therefore you're recognised as what you are and there has been a few occasions where complete strangers have stopped me, be it in the hospital or on the street or whatever, and said, especially in the hospital, 'oh can you come quickly,... I have somebody in intensive care' or whatever, so nurses doctors people recognise you for what you are. Sometimes that has been a visual benefit.

But I don't need the permission of ordination whatever about the grace of it.

There was a recurring theme that women wanted to be 'alongside' the people they served and variations of the phrase 'get stuck in' were used a total of seven times. This was exemplified by this minister:

I actually like getting out and cutting the grass on a sit-on lawnmower. It clears my head. And sometimes I go out to the garden or up to the graveyard and parishioners see me over the fence and they'll wave and I'll go on a stop with them. I could do half a dozen visits by cutting the grass, you know? I think it helps them to see that I'm human and that you do the weeding and I think that makes a big difference.

And when it comes to doing things around the parish I roll my sleeves up and I get stuck in... They know that I will literally get on my hands and knees and scrub something if they're scrubbing something... Because my theory is that I wouldn't ask anyone else to do stuff that I wasn't prepared to do myself. And just because I'm a woman doesn't make it any different.

It is also important to women in ministry that they know their limitations, ask for help, and take time out.

If there's something (*physical*) I can't do I'll say 'look for goodness' sake would you come over here and carry this? What do you think I am some sort of big hefty man?' So I know my limitations and I know what I can and can't do and I think that people, especially here, they respect that.

I've seen a number of ministries ruined by people not being open with their congregations about what the issues are and the problems.

Sometimes you just need to take time and not feel guilty and I'm learning. I'm learning to say 'no.'

But I had to have some boundaries...It's not fair to them (*her children*).. It's not their ministry. I'm their mammy. That has been the hardest I think. And the element of goldfish bowl living. But I think anyone in ministry has that.

Women identified the centrality of team and community to their understanding of ministry throughout. None of the respondents said that they preferred to work alone and many mentioned the importance of community, collaboration and shared decision-making. For some of those who lived with others in couples, families or religious communities this element was described as integral to their theology of ministry.

There's a few dynamics. One is that I have chosen to live my life within the (*religious congregation*) and from that base I go out to ministry...It's the life of somebody living in community.

I think particularly for us (*mentions a church*), the idea of community is really important... I don't think you can be out on a limb, and I'll serve you but you can't serve me. You know I think there has to be mutuality. And I don't like the idea of being six feet above contradiction. It's collaborative.

Actually our understanding is Trinitarian. It's relationship. It's community. If that's our model of priesthood... When I talk about women in ministry I want to talk out of that – that relationality. ..So for me the conversation about women in ministry is a conversation about the theology and spirituality - it's about that whole relationality piece.

I'm not sitting here doing everything on my own. I'm part of a team... I'll wander outside with a motherly eye and wander back and they know I'm here.

The social dimension of ministry was emphasised: to be at parties or drama groups; to mix and to encourage a community dimension in faith communities.

I would hope that in showing them that growing your relationship with God; growing your relationship with a community, because that's what we're trying to do, as well as build up communities for them so that they know they have support.

..and that has been my kind of goal as well – to create community. I wanted to show people how you can be connected to church without being a holy Joe.

I hope there'll always be the opportunities even if it's just a plain social, like I was at a birthday party on Sunday. I didn't know anybody at it, but it was just the kind of hanging round and listening and chatting and just giving the time. Well Jesus spent a lot of time hanging around.

Some women identified a liminality to their ministry for a variety of reasons. The element of a ministry in the gaps, or on the margins came across. Several women felt it inevitable that female ministers would not find themselves at the centre because of the contested nature of women's ministry and because it was normatively male.

It seems to be part of my life because (*place in Northern Ireland*) is a fault line... And then fault lines in the Church as well. Between men and women and between what's expected...I have to...try and do ministry in the gaps.

I've never been the right person in terms of the Institution – but I have still been in ministry my whole life. I'm the right person for God's people. It has meant that I have never had a permanent pensionable job. It has meant real poverty and I would never admit that but I think that's where the Spirit is, in all our poverty. I'll never fit but maybe if I fitted and got comfortable I wouldn't reach people. God is at the margins. As a woman I will never be anything but marginal.

Finally it was clear for many of the women that their theology of ministry was closely related to their sense of self; their authenticity and personal identity.

That's who I am. I'm happiest when I'm with people. And if I can do anything to help anyone I'm always listening for what it is this group needs; what it is that individual needs and trying to make that happen for them, for the group. That's where I'm happiest.

I don't think there's any way a woman would survive in ministry if she hadn't done a lot of personal work in terms of recognising her own strength and integrity and desire for goodness and for good things to happen for people and for life to be meaningful ...I think you have to have lived a number of years and experienced losses, failures, relationships, and then to be able to stand on your own two feet and know that even though you're being rebuffed that what you're standing for is true; it's just; it's fair and it's of God.

...my best friend turning around and saying to me 'no-one is going to want to take you on because you're so...' 'no-one will take you on with those views.' And I said 'if they don't they don't. This is who I am and I believe that God called me for who I am. Not for some watered down version of myself.'

I have no regrets – I do what I am – but it has been very costly.

3. What sustains, nourishes, inspires? ‘Not my faith but God’s presence.’

Here women wrote and talked about the nourishing, supportive and inspirational elements in their lives and ministries. In some cases this was in response to a direct question and in others these elements arose naturally.

The most common theme in this category was that of prayer and spirituality. The spiritual practice of these ministers was the most sustaining factor of their ministries. Every person identified this element.

Prayer really. And relying an awful lot on – I always feel that I walk in step with Jesus...That he’s there with me all the time.

And now and again a phrase that’s used in the liturgy would strike me and I think about that for a while and that sits with me for a while until something else comes to take its place. So I suppose that is what sustains me really, that I have absolute love for the Eucharist and love for my faith.

My faith and the belief that I’m doing what I’ve been called to do... And the fact that it’s hard, it’s difficult sometimes, well you keep it at the back of your mind, try to remember and look back and say well, you know, Jesus didn’t find it easy, it was difficult for him. And he’s my example and although I sometimes you know forget to look at him or to think deeply enough you know I believe that he’s there with me and he will sustain me.

When I look back and see what God has enabled me to do. So all can say is yes, it has to be my faith in God. And God does this because it’s not me. I don’t have that strength on my own

Participants also strongly included their family and friends; their faith communities and colleagues when speaking of what sustains and inspires them.

I do have the support of my lovely community (*of religious sisters*).

I feel really free. I feel free with the clergy that I know, that I work with, who are available to me, either for the work or personally if I have – I’m a person too; a human being that sometimes has problems.

My colleagues who are a good example; who pray with me; who listen to me moaning and groaning! Most of these are (*male*) priests and my ministry would be impossible without them because they keep inviting me in.

...my family life, the congregations...let your congregations know you and love you and care for you.

... astounding and unstinting support from my husband.

My husband. Through training and ministry. ..There were times when I thought 'I just can't do this.' They had a habit of, I see this now, you went in, you had your faith, they tore it apart. And you just wanted to run away. The reason was that you would begin to understand what your faith was and then they would build it up again... so there were times where I was on the phone and I'd say 'I'm coming home.' And my husband said, 'that's ok, yes come on home because you'll be on the first plane back again.' ..so he could obviously see the bigger picture. And there's been difficult times through ministry like in that particularly difficult parish where he has really stepped up to the mark and said 'that's enough, let's step back here a bit,' and he's been really good.

Many women have regular supervision or spiritual direction, though two women report that they would like it but can't afford it. They appreciate the formal support and challenge which comes with this accompaniment. Some women have friends and colleagues who provide more informal but similar support.

I would have one or two people who I would be able to say it to, to be a bit objective – am I reading this right? Or was I a bit unreasonable? And so you need support in that way.

Then I need to mind myself within all of that as well, while making sure that I have regular contact with my spiritual director and that that relationship is maintained to a level that I'm happy with, that I know I'm being supported from sides. So I'm being supported from above and from down here (*laughs*).

Some respondents highlighted areas of their ministry which were nourishing and inspiring:

Praying with people. That actually all the rest I can question... but actually when it's just about hard core praying I kind of think 'well yes.' I've no question about that... that's originally what somebody gave me, was access to God.

...seeing somebody go 'oh' and getting a sense from somebody that they accessed a little glimpse of God being a caring, loving, joyous, delighting-in God, as opposed to 'but I should love God shouldn't I?

I think that what sustains me in ministry is my congregation and moments like today (*she had visited a family in the hospice*) where you feel you can go in to someone like that and you immediately, you read scripture and they just say something like 'that's what he needed. That's what he needed.' I can do that.

Empowering people. That's really God's work.

Women identified particular people, both male and female, who had been role models or had been especially inspirational:

But I had a wonderful rector (N) who was extremely grounded and very spiritual. He was a wonderful role model. He was what I wanted to be. He delivered what I wanted to deliver.

N was the first bishop I worked for where I went I absolutely trust and believe in this man. I was so impressed with him.

I have a lot of faith in St Teresa...Because I like her mind set. You know she wanted to become a priest. And I like that she was ferocious in her love for Jesus. I really like that ferocity.

I am looking to female ministers in other denominations who assume their role so naturally.

The experience of training and formation was something which women took with them as nourishment to their ministry long after it was over:

I got involved in so many things in the college, in the faith community; in the college itself, that has given me the skills that are worth more than that piece of paper.

(Names priest who supported) So I met with him. He offered me a place in *(formation centre)* and I went there for about 6 weeks. That' saved my life. Saved my life. I went through the programme, had a great time actually.

...support through training and retreats.

4. Gender: 'Because I am a woman...'

Because of the title and aims of the research all of the responses are in some way gendered. Women were aware of responding 'as women.' There is therefore considerable overlap between this and other categories. However some women did identify particular issues which arose in their ministry and churches because they were women. Where they have done so I have considered these here. They also took the opportunity to observe that there were many areas which were the same for women and men.

Where the gendered experience was due to particular denominational rules or issues I have presented this in the denominational context.

A recurring observation in the project was that all ministers experience ministry differently and it is not always clear where gender is a factor. Women often observed that their particular experience could be the same for a man. It is therefore important to note that in some of these observations regarding gender, and where they do not specify it, women do not always intend to say that these experiences are *only* because they are female. These are women's experiences but this does not make them exclusive to women. This is generally clear from the contexts and comments.

When asked 'do you think your experience of ministry is different to that of male colleagues?' sixteen (of twenty-two) questionnaire respondents said 'yes.' Others said 'no' or 'not substantially,' but each of these qualified their answer giving some examples of difference but explaining that this was not significant.

Where respondents said 'yes' and even when they generally said 'no,' they indicated the following contexts and reasons:

| Difference due to Gender: Context | Yes | Reason |
|-----------------------------------|-----|---|
| Home | 16 | Housework Childcare Marriage implications where the husband may not be included by others; particular issues where both partners are ministers. Taking on traditional domestic roles as well as ministry. Balancing time with the family with ministry commitments. |
| Ministerial Context | 15 | Personal safety. Men are asked into different roles and their work is more valued. Women are assigned informal roles and men tend to get formal roles. Confined to certain ministries. Perception: -A sense of people not knowing what to do with me because I am not a priest. -Being seen as a 'lady priest.' |

| | | |
|-------------------|----|--|
| | | -Not seen as having the same authority despite being more qualified than male colleagues. -Lower expectations. |
| Church structures | 11 | Male is the norm– women are exceptions/newcomers. These can be <i>power</i> structures and women don't benefit from this. A hierarchy that favours men. Still less likely to get a job in a theological college or as a bishop. No title, or years in ministry not celebrated by jubilees etc. Seen as a threat – there to be controlled. Men are expected to 'take charge.' Men are seen as qualified by ordination – I am seen as amateur despite more qualifications, Non-stipendiary ministers have less status and more are women. Budgets tend to go to men. Parish system is inflexible for women. The system is designed for men and women expected to fit in. The Catholic church sees us as 'extra,' and we do not exist in the structure. |
| Other | 9 | Being seen as representing women. Having to prove/explain oneself. People are more likely to work for men. Everything is different for women and rarely to our advantage. Isolation. No 'colleagues' as such as I am the only woman and the men are priests. |

(i) Discrimination: Intentional and Otherwise

Some women spoke about their experience of direct misogyny or discrimination. This was experienced by a minority of women as they applied for ordination; promotion or particular ministries.

It was also present in attitudes and comments which they felt would not have been made to men in the same circumstances. For some women this was a general sense of hostility; for one person it was a sense of physical threat; others had

experienced sexual harassment and for others it was the expectation that they would make jam for the parish fete.

Participants drew a distinction between this experience in the context of employment or structure and a difference in attitude to male and female ministers which they experienced from congregation members. Some congregation members moved to other churches or asked other clergy to conduct weddings or funerals because the new minister was female. Other women felt that people respected them less or refused to acknowledge their authority in situations where traditionally the minister would be deferred to.

I've had people refuse to let me bury their relatives.

There was one instance where some young men were of the opinion that they knew better than I did and simply would not co-operate and challenged me a lot. And that was difficult.

Women accept that gendered theology influences how they are seen in their traditions but also wonder whether this may also cover a simple prejudice.

And if I were to look at what I understand Paul to be saying I would find that him saying something quite different about the role of women in the church. So I don't have an issue over that at all. I mean I don't agree with some of the things that are said in some of the epistles but it has to be understood that they are historical documents written in a certain society at a certain time in a certain set of circumstances. And so I think possibly that and I think possibly also chauvinism. I'm not sure that the same men would be terribly happy with women in other – say politics or other public roles. So I think that if I were to tell you my personal opinion which would be my own prejudice and bias... – it would be that they are chauvinistic anyway and that their interpretation of St Paul supports their chauvinism but who knows? I could be utterly misjudging them. I don't think I am but! (*Laughs*)

I think it's not hate but fear. The Catholic hierarchy is frightened of women. They feel they can't control us and that's what they're about – control. They would do anything to get rid of us. Maybe the fear turns into hate after a while... Yes, I think I have felt hate.

I've been lucky enough in the diocese I worked in... that I have never come across sexism per se, but I do know that in some dioceses in the Church of Ireland there would be. This whole headship thing in the more evangelical bishops would be a problem. They are really not happy with women in leadership roles.

Sexual harassment did not feature strongly but the two women who discussed it with me urged me to 'ask the others.' It was their belief that women will still not talk about it. I did not specifically ask questions about sexual harassment but will do so in phase three of the project.

I didn't feel safe and there is a particular man that I will not go and see alone and that's that.

There was a priest where I trained who declared his love for me and thought that was reason enough to touch me every time we were alone together. Of course I couldn't say a thing. I was so young. He was thirty years my senior. Nobody would have believed me and I would never have got a Church job.

This is related to the fact that women mostly still do not occupy the most senior roles in churches. In some traditions this was seen as a matter of time. Others felt that there were still barriers to women's promotion and that they were there on sufferance. Several women talked about being treated as little girls.

There's definitely the misogyny among a large section of the clerical people whom I have met along the journey of parish ministry. And also because I'm just a tad younger than many of them there's sort of a 'nice little girl put in a box' thing.

We have to be little girlies. And it's quite difficult. I'm not a little girl.

Many women used the image of 'being heard' for their gendered experience in church ministry:

The thing about ministry is that I have been so often at tables where I was naming stuff I just felt it wasn't being heard because I was a woman naming it. I felt that I'm ten years in ministry and if I said that I should be at the table for that conversation it's like 'we'll get back to you.'

It's not that we need to find our voice. It's that they need to listen. We are talking but we are not being heard.

A recurring theme was a sense of finding a place to minister and belong.

The churches I attended at the time did not have many women in leadership. And at the time I began to be aware of this call I felt there was no place for me. I couldn't understand why women weren't accepted into leadership roles, I couldn't understand – it didn't seem logical to me, nor did I find any basis in scripture for not involving women – not having women in leadership

It's like we have to squeeze ourselves into impossibly small spaces so we can hardly breathe. And we're supposed to be grateful for that. When I look at the talent of other women – not even myself – it's such a loss.

There was some comment about how participants were treated outside their own tradition by ministers of other Christian denominations.

I have had very strange comments initially but now I am accepted in the other – well I only have experience of the mainstream denominations and I'm accepted in those.

No, I have no problems with that now. I remember going to a, sorry a Catholic church and arriving in the sacristy and the priest looking at me and saying 'and what are we supposed to do with you?' sort of thing. 'And how do we address you?' Which I suppose was a bit of a surprise but I got over that.

(regarding Northern Ireland as different from England) How few women in ministry there are. And how most men in ministry don't want to have anything to do with women in ministry. Now whether that's just local to here or everywhere else, but you certainly notice that this is a cold house for women.

There's a local minister fraternal in (*place*) to which I have never been invited...

(ii) Men

Women expressed concern about areas of ministry which needed male ministers. They acknowledged that there were a few areas of ministry where it would help if there were a male minister available and that these were comparable with situations that male ministers might appreciate a female contribution. They identified work with young men and pastoral needs of men in this regard and also noted the fall away from church attendance among young men.

I work a little with the couple of younger guys we have, but there are so many more young women and that is a much more natural fit- as indeed it is for the men to be mentoring younger guys.

I'm trying to get things like men's breakfast things set up and that's something that I can't organise and I find it very hard to get somebody to take it on. For years now I've been trying to get that going so I was mentioning on Sunday yet again. There are things that I can't do. I'm not a man and that's it. So is suppose the idea would be if I had a curate. If I had a man curate it would be perfect but what can you do?

(iii) What Women Need

Women expressed various needs including persistence; courage and the respect of colleagues and others. They acknowledged that many of these needs were not necessarily gendered, but applied to many people in ministry. Some of the needs though were expressed as particularly applicable to women in ministry.

Persistence to keep, just to if they're facing opposition to be as (*hesitates*) There's a something from Lavinia Byrne 'It's your call, God has called you and you have to you follow his call.' It's just simple like that. And not to – to persist with what you believe is right, with what you believe you are called to do.

I think male ministers would probably really need to learn how to be courteous. I've seen bullying from (*denomination*) ministers toward female curates.

I think that what women in ministry need is not that men would change but it's actually need ownership of our own journey. We are not just pioneers; we are not just people who are a bit odd, or different, we are pointing out a lot of the dysfunction...and there's a huge need for us to write our story, to tell our story, not as my odd and unusual journey, but as the reality of women in ministry. It's the reality of being in ministry in Ireland. The gap between the theology we claim and the theology we live out of like naming that gap and we have some way of marking our process

(iv) No Disadvantage

Thirty percent of the participants said that they had never felt disadvantaged by their gender. Each of these women followed statements by acknowledging that others have experienced this differently and using the word 'lucky,' of themselves.

In terms of this congregation if there is an issue I'm certainly not aware of it.

It's not that I'm genderless but I've been very lucky in that it hasn't affected me adversely from - I've been able to achieve all I wanted to achieve... I've been very lucky I've never been kind of censured.

I can safely say - I'm in ministry now for (*considerable number*) years and I could say confidently that if there has ever been an issue it's been once.

Why are women excluded? I don't feel excluded in the least. I think that's making it more of a team ministry. I don't feel excluded... And I don't envy priests their ministry. In fact they are called to do so many other things that

we should be doing can do and now do to free them for their particular ministry

Well I think in fairness to my denomination men and women are supposed to be equal. And I think that they are.

I've been valued for who I am as opposed to what I am. In yes 99.9% of what I've done. I have to say. I'm not looking to be an ordained minister, I'm happy with what I do and even if it was available I don't think – it's not for me... So I guess I'm one of the lucky ones who hasn't come across all that. I've been lucky.

I think it doesn't matter whether you are male or female as long as you're true to yourself at different times and different parishes.

(v) Being Responsible to act with integrity for equality

Women considered what their own responsibility was with regard to equality and respect in the ministry setting. They discussed the elements of looking for offence and taking offence; of being provocative or standing up for themselves. They explored the element of 'fitting in' to models and roles in ministry which have traditionally been occupied by men. Generally women did not want to give their energy to promoting the cause of women but accepted that it was inevitable that they would find themselves adopting strategies or taking a position some of the time.

I know I have a responsibility to be a bit more radical too, but it doesn't seem to be one of my gifts to push out too far. I just find that I, what works best for me is to sort of work underground and in a way eat away at the different relationships slowly, build up trust.

So when I went into college I knew that not everybody agreed with my ministry – I did know that – but I expected them all to treat me with the same respect as anybody else and they did.

I'm not being totally naïve in all of this, and I'm not denying what happened to some of these women, I am sure that it was awful. But I equally know women who haven't found it that way. And what I think that in every crossing of life personality comes into this. And if people don't agree with you it doesn't mean, well, they don't agree with me so I'm not going to talk to them any more. They didn't come to worship so I definitely won't talk to them... But if you build up a negative thing about people that would just be continued all the way along. And that definitely exists.

We can be our own worst enemies in a lot of ways. I think some women try to – deny who they are and try to fit in and I think you can't be – like this whole ladette culture like. Why embrace what's rotten just to fit in? I don't mean

men are rotten but why not be yourself? I think that can happen with women priests that they try to be the ultimate black suit, black shoes – that's fine if that's what they would have worn naturally but not if they feel they're trying to conform. I would conform to a certain extent but I also wouldn't be afraid to paint my nails you know or something like that. You are who you are though you're not going to shock anyone. But I do make – I try not to wear big earrings or something for services. I try not to attract attention – but you can't hide your boobs either so just be yourself! So I think that might happen that some women might try to fit in to the detriment of developing their own personality in ministry.

I don't think it's up to men to do it for us, but I think we have to be able to name that the system doesn't do it...I think that what women in ministry need is not that men would change but it's actually need ownership of our own journey.

(vi) Role and Expectations – Changing the Status Quo?

The theme of the male minister having been the norm and the effect of this emerged in many questionnaires and conversations. Women described the expectation that they would fit in to established ways of ministering and that this system did not allow for a new model to be imagined by women for their own ministries. They also expressed the concern that if they did begin to challenge this or to do some things differently they may experience hostility from others.

I will say deep down it's not that any of these men – it's not that they don't want me – they don't realise what they're missing (*laughs*). And when I say that I mean that they are actually so fearful of alternative ways of looking at people; at family life; at young people; at ministry, they're so fearful of cracking the mould.

There's the thing of let's not let the women change the status quo. We're ok as long as there are only a few women who behave like us, but when women start to bring what I would consider feminine virtues into it of leading by consensus, that kind of thing, I think you might have.

is a question of kind of doing things in a different way mightn't necessarily be welcome in some places.

I do know some of my female colleagues who have had hard times with their vestries because they don't fit into the male model of being the tough kind of knowing all about fabric and finances... If you weren't as sure in yourself it might be difficult to remain true to who you are and try and fit in with the model that they expect.

Also there was the sense of I was a woman and they didn't know how to cope with me in an all-male environment. Because when I came there were no

other women in this area. And women and men work very differently and approach problems differently and so I think they just couldn't cope with me.

And the model we're given here is a male model. It's a male rector with a woman support behind in the kitchen and in the parlour...

If I were to speak more generally about deaconesses and such I think, brilliant if people want to be deaconesses –that's absolutely perfect and I think that we should be supportive of that too. But my issue is with women being ready to support the status quo. And I think that there are problems there.

Where participants began to articulate what might be contributed by women to change this model they used words like 'leading by consensus,' 'collaboration,' and differences in the way they approach different aspects of ministry. This minister describes her prayer ministry:

I think the way I would naturally pray, is very different because I'm a woman. I think the particularly the clergy, and they are the ones we generally hear praying in our tradition, I think the clergy pray with a very patriarchal, hierarchical view of the world... I think my gender changes how I pray and because part of my work, part of my ministry is prayer then, that's hugely different...

Domestic Life

All of the participants who were married and had families mentioned this dimension of gender and ministry. Finding a balance of family and ministry as wives and mothers was challenging and participants acknowledged that it was more difficult as women. They expressed concern that their public ministerial life would not negatively impact their husbands and children. They also expressed the tensions in having to undertake traditional domestic tasks despite the demands of ministry.

And one night I was in and the oldest one who was only maybe 4 or whatever at the time said to me 'Mummy are you not going to work tonight?' And I said 'No, N, I'm not going to work tonight.' And he said 'but mummy you always go to work at night.' I said 'I don't always go to work at night.' He says 'you do, you got to work every night.' And I went 'no I don't go to work every night.' Now my husband would never say anything, ever, you know and has never complained and he was sitting on the seat and he just looked at me and he said 'N, I'm not going to say anything. All I'm going to ask you to do is go and get your diary and tell me the last time you put your children to bed.' I said 'what do you mean?' He said 'just do that.' So I went and I picked up my diary and I looked, and, including Saturdays and Sundays, for five weeks I hadn't put them to bed. And I came back and I went 'I'm sorry.' And he says 'well only you can change that.'

I said 'if I need a shirt I need to go and wash it and iron it' you know? And it's just this automatic thing that these things are there whereas at that stage I was going home, and my husband was working full time, and washing, ironing, cleaning, doing all of that and still trying to do you know, ministry as well.

I have colleagues who have young children and I think that must be very difficult. It means that you have to have a very understanding husband and not everybody does

I know I do more housework than N (*husband*)...I know I did more childrearing than N, so yes I think there are but I don't think those are peculiar to ministry. I think for me as a mum the fact that my working hours are flexible is wonderful, but I don't think that I'm out in the evenings, but I could usually arrange to be around at school time.

(In terms of what she needs) A full time cleaner and I'm not joking!

A small number of women expressed the view that they may have missed out on the opportunity to marry and have children because of the nature of their role. This may have been because of perceptions about women in ministry, or simply the unsocial hours which can be involved.

As Dawn French said in the Vicar of Dibley – you don't go to the vicarage to have a wild time you know? So nobody thought – I was a holy woman of God you know? Nobody thought I was marriageable.

You are available. It's your choice but you do that and at a certain point you go 'there's 20 years gone.' now – I would know from dating that guys just can't handle that, that you're out. They want someone to take care of them so you know if you start off and you have that teamwork at the beginning you can work that through. But if you don't have that, then it becomes a difficult conversation.

Some women spoke about the particular challenges of ministry and pregnancy. This came up in terms of the system being created for men and so women's needs being seen as additional. However when called upon the churches sometimes respond well.

I hadn't told them I was pregnant. They wrote and said – because I'd asked our local parish priest- I'm due to be ordained, what do you think – I'm pregnant. He said 'just don't tell them. Do what Elizabeth did – hide yourself away.' So when they wrote and said 'we'd like to ordain you (*at a particular place*)' I just said 'O that's lovely. By the way I'll be six months pregnant by then.' So they didn't bat an eyelid.

(vii) Money

In circumstances where women's employment was insecure or badly paid, and these were all Catholic ministers, there were serious issues about gender and money. Women experienced poverty and some found it difficult to get a mortgage or to support their family. They felt that male church leaders kept the money for themselves and made bursaries, courses, and opportunities easily available to other men, but not to female ministers. Often women paid for their own training but were not guaranteed employment afterwards. Participants felt that they were treated as grasping if they raised financial issues whereas there was always a budget for their male colleagues or for clergy training.

They were starting another course up north recently – 2 years and then you work in parishes voluntarily for 4 years – 6 years, and then we'll see if there's jobs at the end of all that. It's just not nice. It's not nice behaviour. It's mean. We set barriers. Women in ministry often we did a lot of that jumping over. And now there's a sense of tiredness. We're doing our bit like, and but it's quite hard to keep a balance.

He sat myself and N down and said 'you can keep doing this but you will become – you'll never be well paid, you'll never be taken care of.

It also emerged that women felt that men tended to be given roles where there was a more substantial budget and that women were seen as unable to manage larger projects. One woman had come from a financial background and expressed frustration that less qualified men were put into these roles.

(viii) Support of other women

The support of other women emerged as an important factor. Many women acknowledged the influence and inspiration of other women and felt that there was a need for solidarity, given the sometimes challenging circumstances of women's ministry.

...other women in (*denomination*). They're a lifeline

I do try and support, and equally I wouldn't stick up for a woman just because they're a woman – Margaret Thatcher taught us that! Not women at any cost.

I (*women need*) think space to chat with women, having enough women ministers around and it was brilliant when N (*another female minister*) was here and we could go off and have coffee together and we'd whinge about our

husbands. And you know that was critical mass I think of women. It is quite lonely and isolating. I'm alright. I've got (*a considerable number*) years of ordained ministry behind me. I'm ok but it's nice to have another woman too.

Women need to be supportive of one another. I think everybody in ministry needs to be supportive of one another but I think that women in ministry need to be supported by women.

(ix) Meeting Female Ministers in Person

Some ordained women described situations in which they knew there was some opposition to their appointment on the grounds of gender. They found that this opposition sometimes softened or disappeared when the person or group met them and experienced their ministry. They experienced this as daunting but told the stories with humour and a sense of God's grace. Many also described going to special trouble to include such people.

I found out that either just before I went or around that time that there was an elderly gentleman who had said the words 'there'll be no woman in this parish over my dead body.' So I went and I started and I must have heard that just before I went so I must have been a bit nervous as to which man is it. On the first Sunday coming out – I can't remember I did some sort of children's talk but I happened to give out sweets. And this particular man came out, took a sweet and said something along the lines of 'well for a woman you're not too bad, I think I'll come back next week.' And I said 'that's great just you do that....' Because I made a point of going to see him and he said I had a definite impression of a woman but I didn't expect it to be you. You don't even look like what we thought we were going to get. And I said 'what did you think you were going to get?' 'Well not like you.' So he had obviously made up his mind that I was going to look different, I was going to sound different and everything, I was going to dress differently. I think they expected me to come in like a tweed suit with a bun in my hair and flat shoes – that type of thing. And I walked in with coloured hair, not coloured hair but you know, make-up on. So I think pre-conceived ideas can be washed away really quickly.

Two of the Catholic participants noticed that Catholic clergy treat female clergy from other traditions with the respect they give to Catholic clergy. They do not treat their Catholic female colleagues with that courtesy and respect.

I couldn't believe it. He was describing her as a 'colleague.' I had worked with him for nine years and he would never call me a colleague. So sometimes it's about status and not only being a woman.

5. Denominational Issues ‘in our church...’

Participants spoke with a strong sense of denominational awareness. Their ministerial context was defined by church belonging. While there were many ministerial experiences in common, denomination was also a defining aspect of ministry for women. Similar responses came from participants in denominations which embrace equal access to all ministries. These women expressed a sense of satisfaction at belonging to these and while acknowledging challenges they felt supported and free in their ministry. Two women struggled hard to think of examples of gendered challenges within their denominations (Church of Ireland and Methodist) and could not.

There is evidence that women in churches which have gendered structural divisions of ministry face particular challenges. Here, although women were still very happy to be in ministry, church culture or limitations impacted on their flourishing in ministry and sometimes their personal wellbeing.

(i) Catholic Women

Catholic participants reported joy and satisfaction in their ministries. It was also clear from their contributions that the Catholic context had an enormous effect on their ability to flourish in ministry. Although two Catholic participants said that gender had not negatively affected their ministry the majority of the Catholic women expressed their significant concern with the culture in the Irish Catholic Church.

These Catholic women expressed the view that there is systemic sexism or misogyny in the Catholic Church. This did not primarily emerge in relation to women's ordination but as a wider problem in Church culture. Several of those interviewed used a particular word repeatedly such as ‘the system,’ or ‘the institution,’ to indicate the institutional Church rather than the usually more positive context of their particular ministry. This was a persistent and dominant theme, and source of frustration and sometimes anguish. One woman described her experience of being limited in her role as a ‘constant diminishment.’

I just don't want to be in the system any more.

I'm not too sure I love the Church, but I love my faith.

Lack of leadership in Irish RC Church. Total refusal to renew and move forward. So many people are just giving up and leaving – those in ministry of all descriptions are depressed and seeing out their time.

A guy that had been the same year in me in college had done the same course and had done a pass degree in theology was asked to homilise. And I remember it just dawning on me that 'Oh my God that is because you're a woman.' That actually you can do your best, you can study, you can be good at what you do; you can get really good grades and you can be really competent but you will always be... So it was like this sudden realisation that actually that was the way, the shape, that was the (*pauses*) - I can't even put language on it - the almost realising that actually because I was female; because I'm a woman and because he's a man that never the twain shall meet. It's like it didn't, it wasn't going to be on merit... So that was really shocking for me.

Most Catholic women described the effect that this culture had personally had on their experience of ministry. This is summed up by this minister:

You don't get to live your passion, you don't get to, to drive with your enthusiasm, it's always being tempered and you know and (*sighs deeply*) yes. So there's a disaffection that can happen. And a realisation at a certain stage that look, you know you're never going to be able to... It's almost like loving someone deeply and going 'but actually they're off limits' if that makes sense. Do you know, they can only ever be a distant friend because I can't just say 'look I'm passionate about this.

Ordination

All but one Catholic participant said that they did not wish to be ordained. Some had never been interested but most clarified that this was because they felt the whole clerical Church culture to be unhealthy for both women and men. Many said that they would have felt the call to ordination in the past but now would not pursue it because of the Church culture. The woman who did wish to be ordained said that she assumed that the ordination of women would not come about in a clerical-centred church.

Gender wise, of course there's the obvious thing about not being able to become an ordained minister in the Church. I never really bother about that because I'm not interested in that until the Church gets itself sorted out about

it and realises that you know, just because women and men are different it doesn't mean to say that both can't be ordained.

I don't want to be ordained because there's a shortage of men.

If I were invited in the morning by the pope I would say 'no,' because I know what they would do is the first ten years of women priests they'll all be put in monasteries and they'll all be followed around and made to cut their hair and all that baggage. And why in the name of the living would I take that baggage on?

Would you want priesthood? I've never been interested personally. But I might like to be a prayer leader, do you know? So you know, I think other people might be wonderful pastors, and other people might be really good at keeping the administration of plant in shape. But we just have men who are geniuses and they do all of it.

I would have done it off the bat as a young woman – but not now. But imagine what life would have been like if we had seen women in that role.

Clericalism and Clergy Training and Behaviour

Many of the participants described the difficulties of working in a clerical environment where the priesthood has been elevated, theologised and strictly defined. Many described the behaviour of some clergy as domineering, disrespectful and un-reflexive. They identified problems with clergy training and formation which left priests ill-prepared for collaborative ministry.

And it's this inherent thing that God is held in some way, released through these men. Which is just mad... I think that most of the guys within the system are utterly unaware of the impact of their behaviour. And when you name it they get hurt...it's that lack of awareness. Privilege - it's privilege.

It's *their* Mass. That's the mentality. It's their Mass not the people's Mass. ...I don't think it's meant to be like it's that it's my Mass and I'm the king and I'll tell you what to do, I think it's fear. I think it's fear that if I'm not in control of everything that's going on something will snap. And I'll be in trouble.

Poor formation of even the youngest clergy in relation to team ministry, to delegation; to trust laity; crippling effects of administrative duties for parish priests means far less time for promoting pastoral/developmental ministry. Overt misogyny in some situations.

The great majority of Catholic women expressed their appreciation of their ordained colleagues. They mentioned those who prioritised team; involved them in ministry and leadership and offered personal support. They expressed sympathy for clergy

who suffered from the 'system' and who were disappointed in the Church and said that clergy needed support and ongoing formation.

Two women made the observation that clergy nearly never openly supported and promoted women's ministry because they believed it would affect their prospects. They may offer their tacit or personal support but would never speak out.

The one group who would have influence would be priests. And they won't do it in case they get posted to the back end of beyond! They don't see it as their job to speak out about women. Even the good guys. I think if it were the other way around women would speak out.

Clerical Child Sexual Abuse

The topic of the crisis of child abuse came up as part of the landscape of the Catholic Church in Ireland. One Catholic participant mentioned it in relation to a more closed environment and defensiveness among Church leaders. One person described a sense of being caught in the middle and another said that many people confided in her but the leaders were somewhat protected from the responses of Church members.

I think they all should have resigned, all those bishops, all of them. But I was very shook because whoever turned to I had my back to someone else. And I spent my time I felt very, I couldn't, I felt like crying all the time because every time I tried to say something that was helpful I hurt someone. I had friends who had been in parishes where people had been abused; I had friends, clergy, who were really upset...

The priest cried in the pulpit, for the awfulness of it and for himself, but I was the one people came to. They didn't discuss it with him. I don't think the bishops and clergy will ever get it – and instead of being more humble and open now – they are worse.

Women also drew attention to the dilemma in the Catholic context that ordained ministry is always male and lay ministry in formal roles is very often female. Therefore there is a blurring of gender and the lay/ordained roles.

Many Catholic women spoke and wrote about what needed to happen in the Catholic Church regarding women in general and specifically about women's ministry:

But I think that the institution, the clerical institution, don't value women's voices enough. And what can we do about that? Well maybe we need to get you know louder, stronger about pushing back. I mean we need our voices to be heard because in most cases we are actually hearing more of what's going on for the real people as opposed to what the institution think the people need.

One woman expressed her dream to create a network for female ministers to support one another:

My dream -I would love to set up to have a small building, a small meeting room and a large meeting room, saying to women, who are involved in any of this stuff. Let's form a kind of collective. Let's agree on some basic this is how much we can? this is what's normal ways of treating people, I this is how project would work. Form a collective so that our talents are shared with a kind of integrity and support rather than saying thanks very much for employing us at all. And I would really love to be kind of holding that kind of network. Because I reckon there are so many women around who are very committed and who are trying to give of themselves and they give of themselves and someone says well nobody asked you.

Most of the Catholic participants were single women or members of religious congregations and this is generally true of women in Catholic ministry in Ireland. Two of these mentioned that they thought that it would be impossible to minister in the Catholic setting if married with a family because of the instability of employment and unsocial arrangements. They noted that the model of ministry was single and celibate. This was borne out by one married participant:

My husband has never been invited to any dinner, or anything at work. We don't feel our marriage is acknowledged or respected. I have never earned enough to support my family. That has put the onus on him. My family are constantly on the edge financially. This has affected my marriage and we are constantly worried about when the children are older and need college and opportunities because it's just not there.

(ii) Protestant Women

Protestant participants were generally more content with their ministerial setting and it is clear that the reasons for this were fewer external restrictions and also a more egalitarian church culture. Members of the Methodist Church, the Church of Ireland and two smaller denominations were most confident that their denomination supported equality in ministry. Many Protestant participants did, though,

acknowledge theologies prevalent in some sections of their churches which did not fully support their ministries.

Those ordained in Protestant traditions acknowledged that it was 'part of the job' to work alongside colleagues who did not support their ministry. None complained about this and some complimented these men for working with them. Many felt that although some congregation members had initially opposed their appointments, some of these came around when they met them in person. However, others withdrew and worshipped elsewhere.

The person who is now in (*role*) would not agree with the ordination of women but I sit around the table with him and he treats me just the same as anybody else.

Presbyterian Women

Some Presbyterian women described their assembly as inclusive of women but very much heard in the voices of men and noted that most senior roles are occupied by men. Some reported that Church leaders whose theology leads them to oppose the leadership of women may wish to reverse the decision to ordain women in the Presbyterian Church. One woman described this as 'living under a shadow.' Other Presbyterians did not feel that this was a real concern but expressed the hope it would not come about. Another observed that there is a polarisation and that where there used to be room for people with diverse views this was now less the case.

The rumour went around then that recently that they were going to try at this last assembly to bring forward that we shouldn't be ordaining women ministers any more. So that's in the air for our Church at the minute. But I don't know...I wouldn't deny that it's happening or disbelieve that it's happening because there are a certain number of people who, -the theology has got more and more and more fundamental in these days. And listening to the world that seems to be happening that people are retreating and retreating. So free thinkers are being made go that way or that way. You're not able any more to kind of understand both and accept it.

Several women identified a change in the training college ethos. This is summarised by one minister:

P:...well there's no secret that there's a new principal in the Presbyterian College and I think that the atmosphere has changed and changed markedly

in the time that I have been a student there. I wouldn't say that it was ever particularly easy being a female student...

A: Why is it difficult to be a female student?

P: I think that this has solidified more... I think that perhaps in the last couple of years a course has been instigated for deaconesses. And so I think that there are problems of perception for people around the idea of women in ministry. It's ok for women to be deaconesses and if I were to give my personal opinion I think that the women tend to support this view as well – but it's not ok to be in ministry.

It was acknowledged among Presbyterian women that some who would be active in promoting the status of women may then be identified with this cause to their cost.

‘..there she goes again.’

There is awareness of the need for solidarity with women but the overall hope is that a time will come when this is no longer necessary. There is a commitment to working together and finding ways forward.

I love to preach and feel gifted in the area of preaching and in our tradition preaching is a big deal! It's also the area that the more conservative guys are really uncomfortable about – they have moved a long way from the old patriarchal days and are – I do believe – doing their best to include women – as long as it is not in preaching to men and having authority over men - the issue for me then is that this whole network develops of women's meetings and women's preachers just for women – especially in America – I'm all for a bit of that but I think the Bible is pretty clear that we are all meant to be in this together – men and women.

6. Hopes for the Future ‘to follow Jesus faithfully.’

Respondents generally did not express view or hopes for the future unless specifically asked. When asked this was a general question about ‘hopes for the future’ which could have been answered in terms of personal aspirations or in any other sense.

Where participants answered personally they expressed no ambitions for promotion or career development. Their responses were couched in terms of vocation and service.

That I will never let my Lord down, and that I will be given the strength to continue working despite the changes in my life which are coming.

That I continue to follow Jesus faithfully and this keeps my ministry relevant and fresh.

Hope to preach faithfully and see people grow in their faith and in their love for God and their love for one another – hope to see them grow in the knowledge of the bible and that impact their daily lives – hope to see people come to faith and grow in that faith and to be excited about it – to see young people getting passionate about faith and taking ownership of their devotional lives and given room to grow and develop as they grow into adulthood. Hope to grow myself in all these ways – that I am kept faithful and given Godly passion to do what I do – that I live and minister in a way that honours Jesus my Saviour and his spirit within me. To get better at preaching!

Where participants presented hopes other than personal concerns they focussed on their church communities and concerns for their wider denomination. Some of these focus on social development:

So my aspirations I suppose would be to see the congregation grow; to see social bonds develop with people...there is very great social cogency within the congregation and I'd like to see that built upon with more social events

On faith and Church:

I'd like to see people being ready to discuss the bible – not afraid to exchange ideas; not afraid of the fact that they take different positions or interpret things differently...And not being afraid to talk about that as part of their everyday lives. Without feeling that they're being holy or even evangelical...

(*regarding Retreat work*) I'd love to be able to do something like that at parish level, because it's only in the experiential that things will change. It's not in the programmes as such.

That Spiritual Accompaniment may be recognised as a valid and important ministry within the Church. That supportive faith building and faith sharing structures would be nourished, and adequately formed laity be supported in shaping the future of a more lay centred Christian community.

Some respondents expressed personal hopes in the area of ministry:

I would love to be doing some kind of 5-6 week short study periods or whatever, working on some aspect of our lives but not me imposing something, but something kind of facilitating and working with... That's what I'd hope for myself personally.

That's (prison chaplaincy) where I would wish to be if I had the choice. But I haven't got the choice to be a prison chaplain full time.

Well I'm now (*well into elder years*). I'm as busy as ever. I'm not going to last forever. I have to sort of see how I can, you know, encourage people to take over a lot of the stuff ...so I can pass on the baton when it's right. It doesn't feel right now...I'll know when the time is and of course the Lord will show me.

I've got (*n*) years to go. My hopes would still be the same. To be the best preacher I can, to be the best pastor I can; to be the best evangelist I can.

Although the see house is very nice. I was going to go and measure some curtains there! (*laughs*) No I have never had any desire or anything to climb any ladder. I'm just happy to be what I am

My hopes for myself: not to mess up too much; not to let people down. To do the best that I can. I think that people are crying out for spiritual direction, and I think that this denomination has a huge amount to offer people

Many expressed a hope and desire for support, formation and nourishment for women in ministry.

And I do think too that there should be some support group or some way of meeting with other people in ministry. I don't care what church, denomination or anything, just to share kind of experience of women – I mean that's how you learn; that's how you grow, meeting other people and communicating with them. And if you've got a shared interest, all the more so. I certainly think there should be some kind of support for one another.

I think I would like to grow or reflect on how one might grow a solidarity among women ministers.

Concerns about the future, fears.

These concerns arose when participants were asked about their hopes.

Hopes for the future. God Anne. I'm beginning to wonder do I have any hopes for future. (*long pause. Sighs.*) Ok. ..My worry, and I know you're asking me for a hope, so my hope would be that we could explore and create ministerial opportunities for women and men as opposed to clergy, which meet the pastoral needs of people. ..as a place that gives them access to the transcendent; to meaning in life... I think we will say 'well there's this little opening, so can we envisage something in that box' rather than saying 'actually how do we share the Good News of Christ at this time, in this place in a way that people can access?'

And that somebody won't come in and blanketly decide that we're not needed any more and that is my biggest fear.

I will say this for this interview. I am going to leave. I am leaving... So that is the sadness. I have worked through ministry and I won't now continue because this is not ministry as I understand it. This is trying to follow a male model where I am supposed to be the domestic goddess. And where I'm not considered good enough. And personally I realised I was very weepy and disturbed about all this about a year ago.

7. The Experience of the Research Process

I did not solicit comments about the research itself but many women, both in questionnaires and the interviews, made reference to their participation in the research process. Many expressed appreciation on the grounds that someone was hearing and documenting their experience.

Thank you for giving us this forum in which to share our thoughts and concerns.

Thank you for undertaking this work!

Am delighted Anne you are taking this on...

I think the fact that you are doing this project is a clear and a useful directional statement and it will be very interesting to see what comes from that. Because I think that if things are to be aired on a more formal level in a more formal way, then it's always very useful to have some concrete piece of research that can form a basis for discussion, can stimulate thought, and can be a point of, can be all the things that that kind of document or report can be.

I just tend to keep my head down. You don't want to be a complainer as it will get you nowhere. But these things should be addressed and what you're doing will help that to happen.

A significant minority of participants expressed concerns about anonymity. At various stages in interviews women expressed concern about what they were saying, often in a good humoured way:

You'd better not put that in!

Strike that bit!

One woman who had agreed to be interviewed demurred on the day because of her concern that she might be identified, despite assurances to the contrary. One woman expressed her concern that my own ministry might be affected by my

association with this research. There was in places a sense of nervousness about how participation might be seen by male leaders.

In the coming conclusion I will consider some of the issues which have arisen and propose some areas for future research.

4. Conclusions and Questions for Future Exploration

‘Love ministry. Wouldn’t change it for the world!’

Evaluation and Summary

This study is valuable insofar as it uncovers the experience of women in ministry in Ireland and the issues which arise from this. The primary research question: *what is your experience as a female minister at this time?* has been addressed in a variety of ways. Participants addressed the areas of joys, challenges, gender; understandings of ministry; denomination and many other areas, yielding rich insights. Important issues arose regarding ecclesial vision and structures; training, remuneration and working conditions.

Women in ministry in Ireland are dedicated to their service to God’s people and their churches. Their call is an overarching presence in everything they do and is the source of their motivation and nourishment. They are hardworking, good humoured and prayerful. They say that they are doing their best and, while not perfect, feel they do a good job. They frame their commentary in terms of their faith and their sense of mission and Church.

Participants do not feel that ministry is gendered beyond the natural contribution brought by men and women. The view of the great majority is that the gendering of ministry is unnecessary and detrimental to the participation of women. None of the respondents propose the gendering of ministry nor defend it where it currently exists. Participants wish to promote diverse gifts in ministry and to play an equal part in this. They wish to be treated with respect and to be acknowledged according to merit. They observe that they are working in environments which have largely evolved to serve a system with men at its centre and which does not always serve women’s participation. They would like to see new models for ministry which replace the

traditional 'male-only' model of ministry. They would like to re-imagine the role of spouses and children of ministers and see creative responses to their needs as wives and mothers during the especially demanding years of young families.

These ministers do not have any doubts about their calling and role but they are willing to accommodate and work with those who have genuine theological concerns about women in ministry. They are realistic about the sometimes very significant challenges they face, and are highly motivated to find solutions which are good for everyone. They are quick to acknowledge the contribution of men to their ministries, formation and support networks. They are notably lacking in ambition for personal career development within church structures and hierarchies.

Those who are ordained and in leadership positions still feel that they are judged and evaluated because they are among the first or are in a minority as female ministers. They find this something of a burden but also see it as inevitable. They are happiest when they are 'just ministering' without additional pressures, labels or preconceptions about their views, perspective or what they can offer.

Most of those who are not admitted to orders, in the Catholic Church, do not wish to be ordained. Instead they wish to see changes in the system which they deem to be impoverished and outmoded for clergy and laity alike. They most need to be acknowledged and recognised as ministers and to have fair and life-giving foundations for their ministries including ongoing formation and fair remuneration and conditions. They wish to reach their full potential and calling in appropriate ministerial contexts.

Women in the Church of Ireland, the Methodist Church in Ireland and some smaller Protestant denominations appreciate the commitment to equality within these denominations and express their hope that this will continue to grow. Participants from the Presbyterian Church in Ireland hope that their Church will continue to uphold the equal status of women in ministry.

The respondents expressed a desire for greater ecumenical co-operation and for their sisters across the traditions to flourish. Many of them expressed a desire for solidarity among women across the denominations.

The comments of participants about their involvement in this study were positive. It is noteworthy that concerns about anonymity reflect a sense of risk associated with the research that there may be subtle consequences if women were known to have taken part. This raises the question of whether the flourishing of women in ministry is still seen as a somewhat subversive pursuit. Clearly these are the views of those who chose to participate and some female ministers may have decided not to participate because they saw the project differently.

Questions for Further Exploration

These research results indicate a variety of further investigations. There are four areas which may be particularly fruitful:

1. A Longitudinal Study for Female and Male Ministers

The findings of this study raise many questions about flourishing in Christian ministry. These can only be fully addressed by a longitudinal study with ministers²⁷. Given the findings of the *Women in Ministry in Ireland* study there would be significant value in conducting an Irish longitudinal study among ministers across the Christian denominations to investigate the experience of ministry. One of many fruits of this may be insights into whether ministry is experienced differently by women and men. The results of this research indicate that ministry is not itself gendered unless the context is gendered. A further investigation including male participants would clarify this result.

²⁷ The *Living Ministry* study currently underway in the Church of England is a good model of such a study.
<http://www.ministrydevelopment.org.uk/living-ministry-research><http://www.ministrydevelopment.org.uk/living-ministry-research>

2. Models and Theologies of Ministry

Participants of this study proposed that they had inherited a 'male model of ministry,' which brought both expectations and limitations. This raises three questions in particular:

- (i) Do models of ministry need to be gendered?
- (ii) If there were a 'male *and* female' model what characteristics might it have and how might this work out in ecclesial settings.
- (iii) How is the contribution of female ministers already changing inherited models of ministry?

While there is not a full proposal of a different model in this report, insights shared by respondents into their understandings and theologies of ministry indicate further exploration into operant theologies of ministry among ministers and churches. Two areas particularly emerge here:

- (i) The interpretation of call. Women believe they are called to ministry by God. Those who have had a relatively smooth passage believe that this confirms their call – that God has opened the doors. How then can women interpret it when the path to their ministry is blocked? Some Christians believe that God does not call women at all. Further attention should be given to how the call to ministry is discerned by individuals and churches, particularly with regard to women.
- (ii) Characteristics of operant models of ministry. If women are bringing new qualities to ministry which were not part of the 'male-only' model, how do these characteristics integrate with the Christian tradition and theology?

3. Flourishing among Female Ministers

It is beyond the remit of this study to propose to churches what provision they might make in order to encourage the flourishing of women in ministry, should that be their aim. There is evidence in this study which would contribute to this endeavour and further exploration is indicated around what measures could be taken in this regard, practically, theologically and ecclesially. A further question which emerges in this

area is whether and how the promotion of flourishing in female ministers would also benefit the churches.

4. Ecumenical Insights

The parameters of this study, which included ministers from different Christian churches, allow for insights into the convergences and divergences in the experience of ministry in different Christian traditions. The findings indicate a shared and common experience of ministry regardless of the particularities of denomination or geography, though these have an influence. A further exploration in this area may be beneficial to all churches in reflecting on ministerial formation and ongoing support of those in ministry. It may also indicate new areas of ecumenical co-operation. Some outcomes may indicate developments in theological and pastoral understandings. Findings also reflect a desire among women to experience solidarity and support in ministry across the churches. This may be an area of growth for ministers in Ireland.

The Next Step

This initial report concludes the first and second phases of the *Women in Ministry in Ireland* study.

The third phase of this project will be a gathering of women in ministry where the findings of this report will be discussed. This will be followed with a more comprehensive account of the study, including the outcomes of the discussions in phase 3 and full interviews with five female ministers.

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The Church of Ireland <https://www.ireland.anglican.org/>

Elim Pentecostal Church Ireland <https://www.elimchurchireland.com/>

The Ethical and Shared Remembering Programme www.thejunction-ni.org

Evangelical Alliance, UK <http://www.eauk.org/church/research-and-statistics/women-in-ministry.cfm>

The Irish Bishops Conference <http://www.catholicbishops.ie/>

The Irish Council of Churches <https://www.irishchurches.org/>

The Methodist Church in Ireland <https://www.irishmethodist.org/>

The Presbyterian Church in Ireland <https://www.presbyterianireland.org/>

The Salvation Army <https://www.salvationarmy.org.uk/republic-of-ireland>

Vocations Ireland <http://www.vocationsireland.com/>

Appendix 1: Questionnaire

Questionnaire

1. Your name and contact details [optional]:
Name:
Where you live (general area city, county):
E-mail Address:
-I understand that my name will be kept confidential for this portion of the research
Yes [Please tick] ☐
-I consent to be contacted about the possibility of a further conversation about these matters which may also be anonymous.
Yes [Please tick or leave blank] ☐

-My interest in attending a gathering of women in ministry to discuss some of the themes which emerge from stages 1 and 2 of the research (please indicate):

Very interested Somewhat Interested Not interested
2. What key words would you use to describe your ministry (i.e. what do you do)?
3. Do you minister within a Christian denomination? If so which one?
- 3 (a) Are you ordained?
- 3 (b) If you are not ordained do you feel called to ordained ministry?
- 3 (c) Are you a professed member of a religious order (a sister)?
4. Are you paid for your work?
- 4 (a) Do you have a formal contract of employment?
- 4 (b) Do you have other benefits provided by your employer – pension, insurance or other arrangements? If so what are they (broadly)?
5. How long have you been in Christian ministry as your main life or work choice?
6. Do you think that your experience of ministry is different to that of male colleagues?

- 6 (a) If the answer is 'yes' please indicate the areas in which this is most relevant using these categories where relevant:
- Home
 - Ministerial context
 - Church structures
 - Other
7. What, about your ministry, means the most to you?
8. How is your ministry best supported and nourished?
9. Who have been role models for you as a minister?
10. What do you most hope for your ministry in the future?
11. What do you experience as obstacles in ministry?
12. As a woman in ministry what two changes would most enhance your experience of ministry?
13. Please add here any other comments you may have.

*Please return this questionnaire to anne.francis@zoho.com with the subject 'WMI' or on the *Women in Ministry in Ireland Project* Facebook page as an attachment to a personal message (fb.me/WMIPProject and m.me/WMIPProject).*