

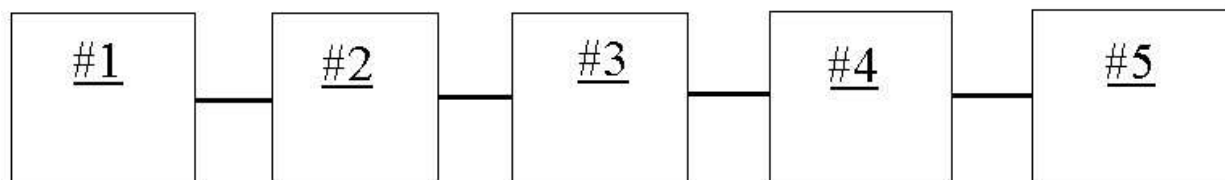
Reading Scripture:

*A Typology of Denominational Positions on the Question of
Women in Ordained Ministry*

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One of the great questions that faced the Church in the twentieth century, and which still demands her attention today, is whether women should be ordained to ministry. Denominations have taken a wide spectrum of positions taken on this issue since each has been faced with the need for a response to the question. Yet, this has not been a question put only to the Church, but also a question faced by secular society. The answers arrived at by secular society have largely provided the benchmark for ecclesial discussion of the issue, with some churches reaching the same conclusions and others differing drastically. Still, in all this breadth and variety, a typology emerges in an effort to explain, in some limited measure, how it is that this spectrum has arisen. Working from an initial descriptive characterization of various denominational positions, as well as a brief analysis of the same, it is hoped that light will be shed upon the explanatory principle underlying this typology, so that the discussion of the place of women in ordained ministry might be more able to move beyond the crippling variety of opinions currently exercised.

The various positions that denominations have assumed on the question of ordaining women can be organized according to the categories in the figure below. The first of these



Legend:

- #1: Those who say "No" by appealing to Scripture's 'Literal Meaning'**
- #2: Those who say "No" by appealing to careful exegesis**
- #3: Those who say "No" by appealing to tradition**
- #4: Those who say "Yes" by appealing to experience**
- #5: Those who say "Yes" by appealing to culture**

categories represents those denominations that deny women access to ordained ministry by appealing to a 'literal meaning' of the text. Some groups that exemplify this position are the

signers of the Danvers statement, the General Association of Regular Baptist Churches, the Southern Baptist Church, and the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod. This position takes the biblical text very seriously and affirms that the “literal” or “plain” meaning of the text denies ordained ministry to women. Some passages that are frequently cited for support of this understanding include 1st Timothy chapter 2, Ephesians 5, and others that offer specific directions concerning the role of women in the Church and home.

This commitment to the literal meaning of the text is often affirmed as a reaction against other hermeneutic methods. Those in this category worry that the hermeneutic methods employed by those in support of the ordination of women, which are seen as complicated and convoluted, serve to take the biblical text away from the average reader. A hermeneutic organized around an idea of the plain meaning of the text is their way to safeguard the text for these non-scholars. However, this position breaks down when two points are recognized. First, to reach the plain meaning of some of the texts concerning women in the New Testament, these denominations call upon highly specialized biblical scholars to perform complicated exegesis. This is precisely what they appear to oppose, namely, the need for highly specialized scholars in the pursuit of the biblical text’s meaning. Secondly, this is intensified by the recognition that the hermeneutic of plain meaning applies only to the original Greek and Hebrew texts, thus requiring more scholarly specialization. Despite these contradictions, this concern shows a broader reactionary trend found within this category. Often, the positions put forward are framed against other current positions found both within the broader secular culture, and within other churches.

Another common thread found within this category is the tendency toward a form of Gnostic dualism. Those in this category are careful to affirm the equality between men and women in terms of their value as human beings. They speak of this as “spiritual equality,” and it

is often employed in connection to Galatians 3:28. Thus, they are able to say that men and women are spiritually equal before God while having different functions pertaining to leadership on earth. The problem is that to say this is to say that spiritual reality has no bearing upon earthly reality, which is the dualism in the Gnostic move. This appears to detach spiritual reality as revealed in Christ from earthly reality, thus removing any rationale for Christian ethics and easily promoting libertarianism. However, those in this category are not consistent here. This is seen with regard to their speech about spiritual leadership. In order to be able to speak about men having authority over women, while at the same time protecting themselves from critique about being overtly oppressive to women, male leadership is called “spiritual leadership.” In effect, this is an effort to water down the language. Yet, here the spiritual does bear upon earthly life as spiritual leadership is acted out in church order. This is diametrically opposed to the disconnect between the spiritual and the earthly in their speech about spiritual equality.

The second category, those who prohibit women from being ordained by appealing to careful exegesis, is closely related to the first category. Indeed, the example of this category is the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, which also occupies the first category. Yet, there is a distinction to be made, for this denomination has readily displayed extensive exegesis in support of its position, whereas those in the first category tend to set forth their position without supplying the full exegesis. This church is aware of the importance of the creation account in the articulation of its position and it works to show the presence of gender distinctions before the Fall. These gender distinctions are taken to be a hierarchy of authority. Based on this, Christ’s redemption of humanity does not remove this created hierarchy. At this point, the dualism employed by those in the first category is brought in to explain texts like Galatians 3:28 by way of reference to the priesthood of believers. In effect, this is to say that men and women both

have direct relationship with God, but only men can serve in ordained ministry due to the gender distinction present in creation.

Besides the issue of dualism, another problem here is that the gender difference found prior to the Fall is taken to be a hierarchical structure of authority based on very slim evidence. One reason given in support of this point is that women is called man's "helper," yet this does not recognize that the Hebrew word for helper, *ezer*, is used seventeen out of twenty times in the Old Testament with reference to God. Another reason given is that man names woman after she is brought to him. Yet, at this point, man simply calls her woman. In the Hebrew, woman is *isha*, as opposed *ish*, the term for man. Here, it is obvious that proper names are not being applied. Rather, there is a recognition of woman as the equal complement of man. Humanity is binary as *isha* and *ish*.

The Lutheran Church Missouri Synod also readily provides careful exegesis to show in what ways women may participate in ministry. It seems that they recognize the difficulty with applying the literal meaning of texts such as 1st Timothy 2. Therefore, they go to great lengths to define an acceptable sphere of ministry for women while maintaining a distinction between this ministry and that of ordination.

Third in the progression of these organizational categories is that of those who do not accept women for ordination by appealing to tradition. This category is occupied by the Roman Catholic church and the Anglican Mission in America. Yet, these two churches approach the question from different conceptions of tradition. The Roman Catholic church appeals to Jesus' selecting of twelve men to be apostles, and the further selection of men as successors to those apostles on down the line. Thus, they appeal to the tradition of a specific practice. There is no doubt that other rationale for this practice may be provided, but this appeal to traditional practice

is the argument most readily set forth. The Anglican Mission in America takes a slightly different line. Rather than appealing to a specific practice of tradition, they appeal to the tradition of the Anglican Communion as a body of teaching governed by ecclesial structure. They are conscious of their existence as a mission tied to this specific ecclesial structure and decide to simply take the historical position until such a time as the greater ecclesial body makes a ruling to the contrary. The presence of this latter understanding of tradition as a body of teaching governed by an ecclesial body is resent within the Roman Catholic church as well, but it is put less to the fore than it is in the Anglican Mission in America.

Those who affirm the ordination of women by appealing primarily to experience constitute the fourth organizational category. The Assemblies of God, the documents of Council for Biblical Equality, and the United Methodist Church are the best examples of this category, though they have slightly differing approaches. Women have always been accepted in ordained ministry by the Assemblies of God based upon the recognition of the Spirit's gifting of women with the charismatic gifts required for such a ministry. Their theology allows for very particular demonstration of these gifts, thus enabling empirical demonstration of certain experience rather than relying solely upon a vague notion held by the individual. The Council for Biblical Equality documents contain a related but less immediately empirical approach to the category of experience than that employed by the Assemblies of God. Like the Assemblies of God, they tend to speak of it in terms of gifting of the Spirit, especially related to Pentecost being experienced by both men and women. However, these gifts are validated not by specific empirical demonstrations, but by a more long-term understanding of the flourishing of ministry.

The United Methodist Church differs from both of these approaches. It stands squarely within the Wesleyan tradition and readily employs the *Wesleyan Quadrilateral* in questions of

biblical interpretation. The quadrilateral is comprised of Scripture, experience, reason, and tradition. These are all seen as influencing each other and leading toward the truth, while the latter three are all subordinated to Scripture. Thus, the United Methodists are able to incorporate their experience with the success of women in ordained ministry into their understanding of the commands of Scripture.

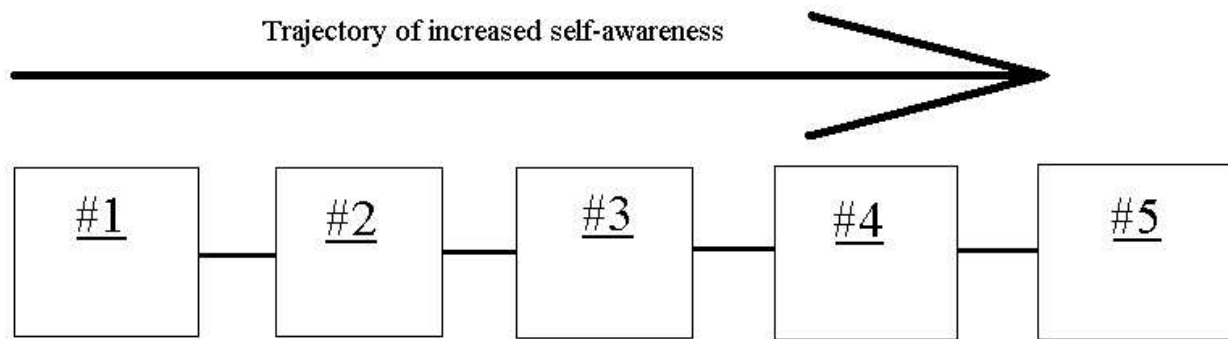
Fifth and finally is the category of those who welcome women into ordained ministry by appealing primarily to culture. Denominations within this category include the Presbyterian Church (USA), the Evangelical Covenant Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and the United Methodist Church. Like the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, the United Methodist Church straddles two categories. In this case, it is due to the Wesleyan Quadrilateral's inclusion not only of experience, but also of reason, which is in some sense tied to current cultural sensibilities. The remainder of the denominations in this category make the same kind of move, only without reference to the Wesleyan Quadrilateral. They affirm that the Spirit is able to lead the Church into new understandings and applications of the Gospel, and that this is accomplished, in some great measure, by varied and developing cultural contexts.

There is a distinction that must be made between the hermeneutic practices of categories four and five, and those of categories one and two. In the first categories, the Scriptural supports for their positions are drawn from a few portions of the epistles, which are read as propositions. This group starts with particular texts that offer specific instructions concerning women and the church. They see these passages as providing universal commands, and then they declare all textual material that contradicts these universals to be exceptions. This betrays a deeply modern understanding of hermeneutics that starts with the smallest and seemingly most obvious texts, and then moves to construct a universal understanding. The latter categories find their basis in the

gospel narratives and examples given in the epistles of women in ministry. Then, from these broad narrative principles and examples, the specific instructions in the epistles are seen as exceptions. This hermeneutic approach, based upon an understanding of the importance of narrative, is much more in touch with current philosophy and hermeneutical scholarship.

Description of these categories assists one in understanding the arguments of the various positions, but it does not readily reveal an explanation for their development. It may be thought that the categories progress from denominations that are generally conservative to those that are more liberal. However, this hypothesis is defeated by the presence in the fifth category of the Evangelical Covenant Church, which is generally conservative in its theology. Another possibility is similar to the preceding, but is focused specifically on the priority of Scripture. Perhaps the categories progress from those who take Scripture seriously to those who do not? However, this is not accurate as all the denominations in question deal very carefully with the biblical text. Indeed, it is those in the first category that seem to take the need for showing careful exegesis less seriously. What then is the underlying principle that will reveal a typology useful for explaining the development of these various positions?

Biblical interpretation is not something done in a vacuum. Rather, it is something that is influenced on many levels. It may be generally accepted, though further categories might be added, that cultural, linguistic, historical, traditional, experiential, and theological contexts all influence how one reads the biblical text. There is no such thing as a *carte blanc* reading of Scripture. Recognizing this, the more aware of these contexts that one is determines one's relative ability to recognize what the text is saying as opposed to what one's context is transposing onto the text. The operative principle underlying the typology of the foregoing categorical description is that of increasing self-awareness.



Those within the first category were preoccupied with a purely textual, “literal meaning” of the Scriptural passages. This preoccupation is owed to the modernist heritage of these denominations. They fell prey to the Enlightenment notion that a pure reading can be obtained. Thus, they forgot their cultural situatedness. Their reactionary position largely demonstrates this in that they react negatively to cultural developments because their understanding of the texts arose within a different cultural context, namely, one dominated by males and the traditional understanding of the nuclear family. As contemporary culture moved away from these norms of the preceding culture, these denominations saw this as departure from a proper understanding of the biblical texts precisely because they had confused their cultural norms with the meaning of the text. Since they are not aware of the factors influencing their interpretations, especially those factors related to contemporary culture, they unknowingly allow these factors to guide them instead of being guided by the text. While these denominations accuse those in latter categories of blindly following culture without giving heed to the Scripture, it is they who most commit this error. Those denominations within the latter categories are more aware of their interpretive contexts, and they tend to think that there is something to gain in giving ear to these contextual influences. This allows them to pay more attention to cultural changes, which in turn leads to a progression of theological understanding. Ultimately, this openness to development allows these denominations to attain a more robust reading of the text that takes into account the situatedness

of the reader and the narrative nature of the text itself. Those in the third category grasped facets of their context, but these have thus far been insufficient for them to adopt a position that affirms the full equality of men and women in the ordained ministry.

In the end, the principle of self-awareness underlying this typology has provided an explanation for the development of the breadth of positions related to the place of women in ordained ministry. Description and analysis has lead to the recognition of this typology, but it is the typology itself that points to the heart of the matter, namely, awareness of interpretive contexts. Until this underlying divergence is sufficiently addressed, the debate about women in ordained ministry will continue to produce numerous new positions while coming no nearer to a broadly shared understanding about the vital role of women in the ordained ministry of the Church.

Bibliographic Appendix:

During the course of this study, fourteen denominations and two collaborative position documents were analyzed, with many accompanying statistics compiled. This information served to illuminate the development of this paper's argument by highlighting differences between the various positions. Further, a convenient way to organize the somewhat tricky bibliography is needed. Thus, it is natural to include this data as a way to provide a convenient starting point for further analysis. Therefore, brief descriptive paragraphs on each of the denominations and documents studied, along with bibliographic information, are provided below in alphabetical order.

Anglican Communion:

The Anglican Communion has no single position on the ordination of women. Rather, various churches within the communion have determined their own positions. The topic is not seen as a forced issue, and those that favor the ordination of women generally expect the positions of others to change as secular understandings progress in those contexts. This raises the question of whether those who favor the ordination of women in the Anglican Communion do so out of conviction stemming from the biblical text, or whether it is favored out of cultural complicity.

The Episcopal Church (USA), a member of the Anglican Communion, has been officially ordaining women since 1976, although some were illegally ordained a few years earlier. Currently, 27% of the Episcopal Church's priests are women.

Sources:

Statistics gleaned from the Council of Biblical Equality (www.cbeinternational.org)

Further information from www.religioustolerance.org

Anglican Mission in America:

The Anglican Mission in America does not currently ordain women. This is primarily because of its self-awareness of its existence as a missions organization whose supporting primates do not favor the ordination of women. However, they remain open to change in the event of a ruling in favor of the ordination of women by the Anglican Communion as a whole. The Anglican Mission in America has also recently produced an extensive document on the issue that is considered to be cutting edge.

Sources:

“Anglican Mission in America Announces Policy of Women’s Ordination”

(<http://www.faithforward.com>: November 5, 2003).

“Report on the Ordination of Women” (<http://www.anglicanmissioninamerica.org>: 2003)

Assemblies of God (USA):

The Assemblies of God (USA) have ordained women since their beginning in 1914. They base their position upon the authority of Scripture as understood within the context of the gifting of women for ministry by the Holy Spirit. They specifically appeal to 1st Corinthians 11 and Galatians 3:28 in support of their position. Currently 16.9% of Assemblies of God (USA) pastors are women.

Sources:

Statistics gleaned from the Council of Biblical Equality (<http://www.cbeinternational.org>)

“The Role of Women in Ministry: Denominational Position Paper” (<http://www.ag.org>)

Council for Biblical Equality:

The Council for Biblical Equality favors the ordination of women. Its position is based upon Scripture as well as a recognition of women being gifted in this capacity. They specifically recognize the full equality of women and men in both creation and redemption. Further, they tend to read specific texts against the principles gleaned from stated examples and the overall narrative. Its foundational document, “Men, Women and Biblical Equality,” was written in 1989.

Sources:

“Men, Women and Biblical Equality” (<http://www.cbeinternational.org>: 1989)

Christian Reformed Church:

Currently, the Christian Reformed Church favors the ordination of women. However, the issue will be revisited in 2005. The move toward its current understanding began in 1970 and was not realized until 1995.

Sources:

“Women in Ecclesial Office” (<http://12.106.150.196>)

The Danvers Statement:

This statement was penned in 1987 and is not in favor of the ordination of women. The document is framed in a very reactionary way and there is very little accompanying exegesis. In

the opening rationale, the document confesses concern for the loss of the literal meaning of the biblical text, which the writers see as entailing the removal of the biblical text from the average Christian. Gender distinction, defined partially as authority structure, is confirmed as part of the created order.

Sources:

“The Danvers Statement” (<http://www.cbmw.org>: 1987)

Evangelical Covenant Church:

In 1976, the Evangelical Covenant Church opened ordination to women. Currently, 8% of its pastors are women. This position of acceptance is based upon Scripture, and the documents are careful to note that the denomination is not simply reflecting society. Extensive exegetical work is undertaken, appearing to openly reject a dualism between the spiritual and the earthly. Further, the full equality of men and women in creation and redemption is affirmed, and the New Testament teaching concerning mutual submission is seen as a subversion of fallen authority structures. Finally, the documents explicitly reject the idea that Western society is crumbling because of a change in the understanding of the opportunities open to women, and affirms the Spirit’s ability to bring about new understanding and application of the Gospel in and through contemporary culture.

Sources:

Statistics gleaned from the Council of Biblical Equality (<http://www.cbeinternational.org>)

“A Biblical & Theological Basis for Women in Ministry” (<http://www.covchurch.org>: 1987)

“Called and Gifted” (<http://www.covchurch.org>: Covenant Publications, 2004)

Evangelical Free Church of America:

Women are not ordained in the Evangelical Free Church of America. This position is based upon Scripture with textual appeal to prohibitive texts such as 1st Timothy 2. However, no denominational document on the subject has been produced. The topic seemingly arises within the denomination’s documents only through its assertion in credentialing literature.

Sources:

This information is somewhat speculative and is based solely upon this author’s e-mail correspondence with the denomination.

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America:

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America has been ordaining women since 1970 when a 57% majority voted to begin this practice. Currently, 21.9% of their pastors are women, and there are also 7 women serving as bishops. They base their position on Scripture while recognizing that the Spirit may lead to development and adaptation in the understanding of the Gospel. The Gospel is seen as compelling the recognition of the full equality of women in this regard based upon baptism and the priesthood of believers. Arrangements of church order in the New Testament are understood as based upon need, ability to serve, and cultural customs. The Evangelical Lutheran Church has also developed extensive documentation in order to further encourage and support women in ordained ministry.

Sources:

Joseph A. Burgess, "What do the Scriptures say about the Ministry of Women in the Church?" (Archives of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America: 1972)

American Lutheran Church, "Reports and Actions: Report on the Ordination of Women" (Archives of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America: 1970)

"Women Bishops and Presidents in the Lutheran Worldwide Communion" (Archives of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America: 2002)

"Fact Sheet About Ordained Women" (Office of the Secretary, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America: 2002)

"Excerpt from Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches Board of Directors Report to the 1976 Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches Convention" (Office of the Secretary, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America: 1976)

General Association of Regular Baptist Churches:

The General Association of Regular Baptist Churches does not ordain women. This stance is based upon an appeal to Scripture, without the demonstration of significant exegetical work, and done in a reactionary manner over-against cultural trends. Some language betrays the presence of a dualism between the spiritual and the earthly, with language about spiritual leadership and equality confusing the situation even further.

Sources:

"Resolution #10: The Ordination of Women" (Passed 1975: Administrative Office of the General Association of Regular Baptist Churches)

"Resolution #2: Women's Role in the Church and Home" (Passed 1984: Resolutions Passed at the General Association of Regular Baptist Churches 53rd Annual Conference)

Lutheran Church Missouri Synod:

Ordained ministry is not open to women in the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod. This is based upon the denomination's understanding of Scripture, and extensive exegesis is provided in support. Women are seen as subordinate in the order of creation and, thus, in that of redemption. A hint of a spiritual versus earthly dualism arises when dealing with the equality of men and women in the priesthood of believers. Much work is done to provide a place for women to minister in ways that are not seen as expressly forbidden in the biblical text.

Sources:

"Women in the Church: Scriptural Principles and Ecclesial Practice" (<http://www.lcms.org>: 1985)
"The Service of Women in Congregational and Synodical Offices" (<http://www.lcms.org>: 1994)

Presbyterian Church of America:

The Presbyterian Church of America does not support the ordination of women. Further, the topic has not been an issue of organized discussion since 1933. However, this denomination has developed "Women in the Church" groups organized under the Christian Education committee.

Sources:

"Appendix C: Women in the Presbytery Organization" (1st General Assembly, 1973: <http://www.pcanet.org>)
"Women in the Church" (1st General Assembly, 1973: <http://www.pcanet.org>)

Presbyterian Church (USA):

This denomination has ordained women since 1956, and currently 19.6% of its pastors are women. The documents identify Scripture as the foundation for this position and further recognize the ability of the Spirit to work through contemporary culture in leading the Church to a better understanding of the biblical text. Hermeneutics based upon "literal meanings" are rejected because of the oppression produced by their consistent application. Extensive exegesis is employed to further elucidate Scriptural support, generally working from the whole of the narrative principles and examples before moving toward passages dealing with specific prohibitions.

Sources:

Statistics gleaned from the Council of Biblical Equality (<http://www.cbeinternational.org>)
“Report of the Ad Interim Committee on a Biblical Study of the Position of Women in the Church” (PCUS, 1956: PresbyTel, General Assembly Council, <http://www.pcusa.org>)

Roman Catholic Church:

The Roman Catholic Church does not support the ordination of women. This is based upon Scripture as well as an understanding of tradition and its practices. One example of such an argument is that Jesus ordained twelve men, who then ordained men, and so on down the line. Thus, the Roman Catholic Church ordains only men. An idea lying under the surface here is that one must necessarily be male to represent Jesus in the way that a priest or bishop is meant to.

Sources:

John Paul II, “Ordinatio Sacerdotalis: Apostolic Letter” (<http://www.vatican.va>: 1994)
“Catechism of the Catholic Church: Part Two, Section Two, Chapter Three, Article Six, Paragraph Six – Who Can Receive This Sacrament?” (<http://www.vatican.va>)

Southern Baptist Church:

Women are not ordained in the Southern Baptist Church. This position is based upon the denomination’s understanding of Scripture, although not much exegetical work is readily shown. There is a tendency to carry over an idea of familial male headship to church order. Further, there is an implicit duality between the spiritual and the earthly as demonstrated by their understanding of the priesthood of believers as only referencing an individual’s standing before God. Women are seen as subordinate in the order of creation and, thus, that of redemption.

Sources:

“Women in Ministry” (<http://www.sbc.net>)
“The Baptist Faith and Message: The Family” (<http://www.sbc.net>)

United Methodist Church:

United Methodists have ordained women since 1956, and currently 19.2% of its pastors are women. This position is based upon Scripture as read from an understanding of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral, which affords a place for cultural sensibilities (reason) and experience to enter into the interpretive structure. Appeals are often to Jesus’ inclusion of women in his ministry, Galatians 3:28, and a general argument from examples and principles brought to bear upon particular prohibitive passages. In addition, the United Methodist Church is culturally

aware, considering the secular women's rights movement as a hopeful project. This denomination has taken serious steps to further promote and encourage women in ordained ministry.

Sources:

Statistics gleaned from the Council of Biblical Equality (<http://www.cbeinternational.org>)

"Goals and Recommendations for Full Participation of All Women" (<http://www.umc.org>: 2000)

"The Status of Women" (<http://www.umc.org>: 1996)

Tom McAnally, "Why Do United Methodists Ordain Women When the Bible Specifically Prohibits it?" (<http://www.umc.org>)

Steve Harper, "The Ordination of Women" (<http://www.umc.org>)