

Alleviating Isolation: The Role of Online Community in Sustaining Clergywomen

Project Overview

Two core questions drove my project. In what ways can an online collegial community alleviate the isolation felt by clergywomen, which is often exacerbated by intersectional identities, and offer a quality of relationship sufficient to nurture, sustain, and retain women in ordained ministry? If online connection falls short, how might we best expand an existing social network to build face-to-face community? I attempted both to learn what is most helpful for sustaining clergywomen and to discern a direction for the ministry I serve, RevGalBlogPals, an ecumenical online ministry dedicated to creating resources and community for clergywomen.

My research confirmed that isolation is a daily reality for many clergywomen. Clergywomen who prioritize collegial community will seek it, or create it if they do not find it. Nearly all those surveyed or interviewed rely on some form of digital connection; (98% surveyed named Facebook; 92% named texting; fifteen other means were named.) Both young and old named age as an isolating factor, but clergywomen isolated geographically face the greatest challenge. In small towns and rural areas, clergy networks can be unwelcoming to clergywomen, particularly in areas of the country where faith traditions that do not ordain women dominate local culture. While the most helpful digital connections stem from or lead to face-to-face relationships, when geography and exclusion are both factors, online community provides a crucial means for professional development and personal support.

Judicatories and churches can support clergywomen by acknowledging theological and geographic isolation, encouraging multiple forms of connection to

colleagues, and funding technology that supports digital community. I am creating a plan to pilot affordable online coaching groups for rural and small town clergywomen as a new ministry for RevGalBlogPals.

Project Activities

My activities included holding eight focus groups with clergywomen, both online and in five locations around the United States; conducting a digital survey to which 778 clergywomen responded; and reading a wide range of books, studies, and articles related to the experiences of clergywomen in a variety of settings and from numerous Christian traditions, as well as on topics such as leadership, intersectionality, body image, sexual harassment and assault, family status, sexual orientation and gender identity, self-care, clergy mental health and well-being, online community and connection, and loneliness.¹ I will unfold all of these activities in greater detail below.

I started this project with some ideas drawn from my personal experience over the past 25 years and the anecdotal evidence gathered from my male and female clergy colleagues over the past sixteen years. As a laywoman serving on a United Church of Christ Committee on Ministry in the 1990's, I heard testimony from multiple pastors under review for misconduct. Each one described his sense of isolation as a factor in having an extramarital relationship, whether within or outside the congregation he served. (I do not mean to suggest that men are more susceptible, only that in those cases the pastors were male.) When I went to seminary a few years later, I did so with a determination to find and maintain a community of accountability in ministry. I experienced firsthand the significance of a supportive, collegial community when invited

¹ I have included a selected bibliography.

to a clergy support group at the start of my first call. My field education mentor had described such groups as crucial. I was fortunate to be serving in the area where I had been in discernment, and to live in a setting with an abundance of both male and female clergy in my denomination, allowing for multiple opportunities to interact with colleagues, both for mutual support and text study. When the inevitable crisis came early in my first call, I had a dozen trusted colleagues to hear my story.

This is not the case for all pastors, however, and my research bears out what I already knew anecdotally: it is particularly problematic for clergywomen who, whether via search and call, an appointment system, or some combination, come to serve churches in places they find isolated geographically or theologically or both, because even in moderate-to-progressive mainline denominations, the default preference for churches is a white, male pastor. Women thus tend to be called or appointed to pulpits in less desirable social, theological, and/or geographic locations, where they are in a social fishbowl and a collegial desert.² Social support is an indicator for positive mental health among clergy, and social isolation a negative indicator. Clergymen feel a similar level of "emotional exhaustion" and satisfaction, so this is not simply a gendered difference, but a locational one.³

Does this really matter? After all, ministry is a sacrificial call. For the church to thrive, however, social science research suggests the pastor must also thrive.⁴ And neuroscience supports my supposition that isolation diminishes pastors and their ability

² Contemporary evidence from my survey and focus groups bears out the data from earlier studies as reported by Zikmund (1998), Lehman (2002), Bammert (2010), and Miles (2011).

³ Francis, p. 326, and Proeschold-Bell, p. 11-14.

⁴ Bloom, p. 26.

to do ministry well. Perhaps the most important book I read for this study was *Loneliness: Human Nature and the Need for Social Connection*, by John T. Cacioppo and William Patrick. They describe humans as "obligatorily gregarious."⁵ We are made to be connected to others; this is not simply a theological concept, but a physiological one. Loneliness diminishes our executive control, which is to say, lonely people make poorer choices about what to eat or drink, whether to smoke, even about sexual behavior. The pastors telling Committee on Ministry what led to their misconduct were right, at least in part. Feeling disconnected and isolated at the very least contributed to their poor decisions.

Further, feeling lonely feeds on itself. "The cynical worldview induced by loneliness, which consists of alienation and little faith in others, in turn, has been shown to contribute to actual social rejection."⁶ When we feel lonely or isolated, they say, we are likely to make it worse for ourselves. And inversely, when we feel satisfied and safe, our capacity for creativity and collaboration are increased by what Cacioppo and Wright call "psychological uplift." We cannot change other people (or other pastors), but we can provide opportunities for them to connect and be changed by their interactions.

(Similarly, Amy Banks writing in *Zygon*,⁷ assures us that the brain can get better. "A healthy connection may quite literally rewire the brain to yearn for more healthy connection.") Cacioppo and Wright laud megachurches that "adventitiously address human loneliness in each of the three dimensions -- intimate, relational, and collective."⁸

⁵ Cacioppo & Wright, p. 52.

⁶ Ibid, p. 175.

⁷ Banks, p. 175.

⁸ Cacioppo & Wright, p. 254.

The authors warn, however, that "parasocial" relationships, like those you have with a pet or a TV character, do not help, and nor do one-way relationships on the Internet.

Loneliness, or isolation, is of course not the same thing as solitude. A United Church of Canada pastor, who cares for her severely disabled husband, wrote in an email to me after one of my focus groups, "...because of his disability, he's always home when I am. The last time I was alone in our home was December 2013 when Peter had an overnight hospital stay. I don't know how to make this sound less whiny. I have a good life. I know that. But what struck me as I was reflection on this is the difference between isolation, which seems largely imposed by circumstance, and solitude which, for me at least, is self-care. While I would never seek to be more isolated, I look for opportunities for solitude wherever I can find them."⁹ Indeed, contemplative spiritual practices are crucially restorative for pastors.¹⁰

While visiting Fort Worth, Texas, to conduct a focus group, I attended worship at Trinity Episcopal Church, where I heard a sermon by the Rev. Dr. Andrew R. Wright, on the text John 15:1-8, in which Jesus describe himself as the vine and his followers as the branches. Dr. Wright spoke of our need to "coinhere," or abide, with one another as people of faith. I found this a powerful metaphor for the connections clergywomen have made through the online community, RevGalBlogPals, which I helped found as an informal network of clergywomen bloggers in 2005. From the outset, our branches have been diverse in age, geography, and denomination. Over the past thirteen years the group has grown from a few dozen to many thousands, but it is clear that the quality of

⁹ Rev. Susan Ivany, via email, March 22, 2018.

¹⁰ Bloom, p. 21.

relationship found by the inner circles who write for our website, moderate our online spaces, participate in our online affinity groups, and/or attend our continuing education events and informal gatherings is deeper and more abiding than that of the women who simply read our website offerings or visit our general Facebook group.

I was fascinated to discover the Flourishing in Ministry Project, a research project supported by the Lilly Endowment, located at the Mendoza College of Business at the University of Notre Dame. Their 2013 report affirms my thinking in social science terms:

"One of the most significant insights from our research is the importance of membership for the well-being of pastors. The degree to which a pastor experiences a sense of belongingness -- community, fidelity, and mutuality -- with other pastors appears to be one of the most important determinants of that pastor's flourishing. Pastors who experience a strong sense of membership in the community of pastors are much more likely to experience and sustain high levels of happiness and thriving over many years. They also appear to be the most resilient and are among those most likely to experience a long and fruitful ministry."¹¹

Like members of other professions, clergy value the feedback and input of their peers, which offer the best vocational support for a pursuit of excellence and "unique kinds of social support."¹² In other words, clergy colleagues get it, and they know when you do not. Collegial relationships are therefore invaluable. Pastors operate at a disadvantage when they lack community with other clergy. Bloom's study also makes the case for interdenominational clergy groups, which "reduce or eliminate any potential ... for intra-denominational problems."¹³

Women do have a special need for this collegial connection, because unlike men, they deal daily with the sexism both of North American culture and our religious

¹¹ Bloom, p. 35.

¹² Bloom, p. 37.

¹³ Bloom, pp. 39 and 45.

institutions. Luther Seminary professor Karoline Lewis writes in her book *She: Five Keys to Unlock the Power of Women in Ministry* with reference to clergywomen,

"One of the absolute essential truths of thriving as a woman in ministry is to have girlfriends who are also in ministry. While girlfriends are absolutely essential in the whole of your ministry, they are perhaps the most critical when it comes to dealing with sexism. You will need to know that you are not alone. You will need to be affirmed in the fact that you are not making this stuff up. You will need spaces to cry, be angry, scream, and swear."¹⁴

Membership, belonging, social support, connection, community -- whatever term is used to describe it, clergy need it to do their work well, and clergywomen need each other. The question is how effective it is to find that community online.

Evangelical scholars began to study spiritual formation and discipleship in relation to online connection while some mainline folk resisted. In 2012, Philip Meadows wrote, "If digital aliens resist the medium, and digital pioneers reshape the medium, then the basic stance of digital natives is to 'remix' the medium. They have may have spiritual friendships that are maintained exclusively in either physical or digital spaces, but they are both experienced as real relationships that transform everyday life in different ways."¹⁵ Meanwhile, "I get it now. I have to use social media or it will use me," wrote Craig Barnes in the *Christian Century* in 2013, an attitude that seems almost quaint over five years later. Eddie Glaude, that same year, commented in the *New York Times* that for religious folk, "Online communities stand as a supplement of sorts." It's true, we cannot break literal bread online, although we can certainly imagine ourselves gathered around a virtual table. Yet Debra Avery, a PCUSA pastor, was sold by 2011:

¹⁴ Lewis, p. 140.

¹⁵ Meadows, p. 175.

"For me, social networking is very much like Paul's vision of the *koinonia*. Paul called it the body of Christ, the proof of which comes in the recognition and honoring of the many and various gifts shared and received with grace within the body."¹⁶

I was an even earlier adopter; I started blogging regularly in 2004 and by 2005 had a wide range of connections with other bloggers, a combination of clergy and academics writing about their work, their lives, and the tension between the two. I had a great clergy network in person, but I was looking for other clergy moms, something I could not find IRL (in real life). When RevGalBlogPals (also known as RGBP or RevGals) began, I helped organize our online needs. As I wrote in an article about digital connection for the BTS Center's Bearings blog in 2015, "As one of the more technically adept members of the group, I learned that anything we came to rely upon would change before we were ready." This proved to be a metaphor for the expansion of online spaces and digital forms of connection over the past 13 years. The technology, the formats, the devices used to access our shared spaces multiplied and transformed. As church social media guru Meredith Gould says of virtual community, "Leadership can emerge within one month rather than three, cliques within three months rather than six. Unless new leadership emerges and long-time participants become willing to serve as elders to welcome newcomers, an online community can become moribund in fewer than three years."¹⁷ It sounds like church on steroids.

Longtime RevGal Carol Howard Merritt said in a 2011 interview with the Christian Century that she goes online for collegiality. "I began to understand the power of

¹⁶ Avery, p. 39.

¹⁷ Gould, p. 31.

community that forms on Twitter when my father was facing a life-threatening surgery. I tweeted about it and received a flood of messages from people all over the world, saying they were praying for me and my dad. I can't quite communicate how comforting that was."¹⁸ Deanna Thompson, a professor of religion at Hamline University, confessed her change of heart about digital connection, which resulted from an outpouring of love and care from people she did not know after she was diagnosed with cancer. "I encourage us not to ignore the wider notion of the body of Christ that is also at work in Paul's way of relating to local churches like the one in Corinth, one that does not always depend on face-to-face interaction, one that I am calling the *virtual* body of Christ."¹⁹ Keith Anderson argues,

"The choice between digital and face-to-face is ultimately a false one in part, because as with all these categories, it defies people's lived experience. Our daily lives are often far more integrated -- and digitally integrated -- than religious leaders and institutions perceive...used together, social media and the face-to-face can mutually reinforce one another, strengthening and deepening relationships over time and distance."²⁰

A plus: the community we find online is available 24/7; when one time zone goes to sleep, another is waking up. A minus: social media can be contentious, and even damaging, depending on the user. Viewed through a feminist theological lens, social media can be what we make of it. Xochitl Alvizo writes, "It takes effort to constructively relate to one another across our differences and to participate in creating new time/space where our varied feminist endeavors can be strengthened and nurtured."²¹ My

¹⁸ Merritt, p. 38.

¹⁹ Thompson, p. 39.

²⁰ Anderson, p. 83, 85.

²¹ Alvizo, p. 164.

own feminist values guided me in managing each new online space RevGals added over the years. Once someone becomes part of our community, though they be difficult, they become "our" difficulties, part of our expression of the family of Christ's people.

This portion of my study reinforced some things I held true: that virtual community is real community, that it forms and re-forms more quickly than face-to-face community; it also challenged me to consider that the two kinds of community work better together than virtual community might alone.

From October, 2017, to March, 2018, I conducted eight focus groups, five in locations around the country and three online. A focus group planned for Washington, DC, was cancelled due to a low number of RSVPs.

Location	Date	Participants	Denominations represented
Boise, ID	10/23/17	12	PCUSA, ELCA, UMC, UU, Nazarene
Mechanicsburg, PA	3/5/18	5	PCUSA, ELCA, UCC
Bartlett, IL	3/12/18	5	PCUSA, ELCA
Fort Worth, TX	4/30/18	7	Episcopal, UCC, UMC
Tucker, Georgia	5/8/18	6	PCUSA, UCC, Disciples of Christ
Online 1	3/21/18	4	PCUSA, United Church of Canada
Online 2	3/22/18	4	PCUSA, ELCA, UMC, Cooperative Baptist
Online 3	4/12/18	3	Disciples of Christ, UMC, PCUSA

The participants ranged in age from late twenties to late sixties. Most had prior contact of some kind with RevGalBlogPals, with the exception of a few in Boise and two in Illinois, who came out of curiosity when invited by the hosting pastor.

From the introductions given in the very first group, it became clear that clergywomen have been finding community on line since its earliest days as one of our

participants described Ecunet, a religious online network similar to Usenet, as well as participating in the PRCL (Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary) listserv.

Women in all the groups named the shifts in contemporary life, away from neighborhoods and toward activities. They described ways that they find community locally through common interests (knitting, running, children's sports and other pursuits, caring for grandchildren). Most of the women who attended face-to-face groups live in a city or in a near suburb of a city. All of them named resources we might expect in and around a modern city.

The story was different for those who came from more remote areas. They described being instantly recognizable in their small towns, having no privacy if single, and serving churches with limited resources for continuing education as well as limited pastors available to cover if they manage to get out of town. Clergywomen from rural areas or conservative small towns told us about receiving negative treatment from other pastors and churches in the community. They echoed the stories of clergywomen in the many books I read about women in ministry. One told us about a group in her town that "prayed against" her. While the face-to-face groups skewed toward women with adequate and in some cases ample personal and vocational resources, the participants who came from more isolated areas, both geographically and theologically, offered a preview of the digital survey results.

The digital survey was available online for two weeks in March, 2018. To my knowledge, it was shared in the Facebook groups for RevGalBlogPals, Young Clergy Women International, and UCC Clergywomen. 778 surveys were completed.

Age	Responses	Percentage
Under 25	3	0.39%
25-34	76	9.77%
35-44	137	17.61%
45-54	171	21.98%
55-64	293	37.66%
65+	98	12.6%

Respondents represented 42 denominations, some with multiple affiliations.

Those with more than four respondents were:

Denomination	Responses
United Church of Christ (UCC)	184
Presbyterian Church (USA)	179
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA)	98
United Methodist Church	87
The Episcopal Church	67
Baptist (many multiple affiliations, including American Baptist, Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, and Alliance of Baptists)	29
Anglican Church (some specified Canada)	22
Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)	21
United Church of Canada	18
None or non-denominational	9
Mennonite	7
Evangelical Covenant Church	6
Church of the Brethren	4

I asked open-ended questions about race and sexual orientation, not wanting to create multiple choice categories that would literally "other" some respondents. 3.23% of respondents identified as other than white/Caucasian.

Race	Responses
White/Caucasian	739
African-American/Black	8
Native American/mixed	5
Asian-American/Asian/mixed	4
Hispanic/Latinx/mixed	4
Mixed (unspecified)	1
Afro-Caribbean	1
New Zealand native	1
Human/Other/Did not answer	15

I assumed female as gender identity since the survey specified the study being about clergywomen. (I note that some cis straight women have trouble differentiating between orientation and gender identity.) 16.48% of respondents who answered identified as something other than straight.

Orientation	Number of Respondents
Straight/heterosexual	588
LGBTQIA+	107
Straight-ish (and other variations)	9
Non-answer (cis, female, widow, none, celibate, undeclared)	54
Declined to answer	7
Skipped the question	13

The next two questions inquired about family and relationship status, as well as living arrangements. 65% of respondents are married, and almost 60% own a home. The statistics and the explanations by those who chose "other" did not suggest a correlation with isolation.

Next I asked, "What forms of digital connection are part of your support network?" 5 skipped this question, and 773 responded.

Answers	Responses	Percentage
Facebook	756	97.80%
Twitter	244	31.57%
Blogs	342	44.24%
Facebook Messenger	562	72.70%
Texting	710	91.85%
None	2	0.26%
Other	160	20.70%

In the Other category, respondents listed email (54), Instagram (47), WhatsApp (16), Snapchat (6) and various forms of video chat - FaceTime, Skype, Google Hangout, and Zoom (24), as well as YouTube, Messaging in games, and FitBit groups.

I then offered an open-ended question, "Where else do you find community and connection?" 762 responded, while 16 skipped the question. Their answers ranged from singing in choirs to running, from political activities to knitting or card groups, from "friends and family" to dog shows. As I said in the project overview, clergywomen who prioritize collegial community, and community generally, will seek it, or create it if they do not find it.

Many named RevGals or Young Clergy Women International as important in their lives, as well as NEXT Church (a PCUSA initiative with a popular annual national gathering) and UNCO, an annual ecumenical "unconference," at which participants determine the topics of interest together and lead workshops themselves.

Those four groups, and particularly RevGals and YCWI, were offered up again in answers to the next question, "Where have you found support specific to clergy? Clergywomen?" Other organizations named were the International Association of Women Ministers (IAWM), National Association of Presbyterian Clergywomen, Academy of Parish Clergy, Women Touched By Grace, Sustaining Pastoral Excellence, CREDO, Coordinating Center for Women, UCC 2030 Clergy and NextGen Leadership Initiative, Bethany Fellows, and Baptist Women in Ministry. Local clergy study groups were also mentioned. However, 82 (10.57%) answered with some form of none, very little/not much, and even LOL. 12 skipped the question.

The next two questions proved most striking and have been the most influential for my thinking about what RevGalBlogPals might offer in response to the survey.

"When have you felt isolated in ministry?" 770 responded to this open-ended question, with their narrative answers falling into the categories below. Many offered multiple examples.

Answers	Responses
Most of the time/all the time/every single day	158
Rural church/geography/location	105
Times of crisis/weight of pastoral role/demands	83
Conflicted/challenging churches	59
Seldom/never	58

Answers	Responses
Ministry transitions/fired/between calls	51
While serving a small church	48
Dealing with sexism	40
Part-time or bivocational call	37
Personal or family issues	36

Other responses included denominational issues, issues with staff and particularly heads of staff/senior pastors, theology, political party, and being single or widowed. I was surprised at how few named sexual harassment or assault as factors.

I then offered a multiple choice question with demographic categories - "Have the demographic categories you fall into contributed to feelings of isolation?" 707 answered.

Category	Responses	Percentage
Race	27	3.82%
Age	355	50.21%
Geography	362	51.20%
Ability/disability	54	7.64%
Relationship Status	243	34.37%
Family Status	174	24.61%
Sexual Orientation	108	9.48%

Highlights include that 100% of clergywomen 34 and under chose age, as did 100% of clergywomen over 65.

Most noteworthy for me was that over half of those who responded named geography as an isolating factor. Based on the narrative answers to earlier questions, and the conversations of the focus groups, I knew this was an important factor in the isolation of clergywomen, but I was surprised that it ranked first.

An open-ended question about what would be desirable in a continuing education program to sustain clergywomen yielded many responses that stressed incorporating digital spaces such as Facebook groups for ongoing interaction, affinity groups by personal situation or job roles, a special concern for clergy in small churches, and a challenge to keep the cost low. Survey participants would like to see a range of activities from spiritual practices and direction; facilitated group-building; physical activity like yoga or massage; anti-racism education; prayer for and with each other; creative pursuits; and simple downtime. Interestingly, a number of respondents 55 and over recommended mentoring for new clergy, while only one clergywoman under 35 suggested mentoring. I think we are seeing a shift in what that word means, generationally.

Two questions asked about funds available for continuing education and the discretion to spend them: 74.77% who answered have such funds; 63.09% of those who answered can choose how to spend those funds, with the rest needing the approval of a board or committee. The next two questions asked whether respondents minister while living with a disability or chronic health condition. 29.51% answered yes; 21.76% of those who answered yes to this survey question chose it as an exacerbating factor for isolation in the earlier question, which is close to the 7.64% of all respondents who indicated ability or disability as an exacerbating factor.

I then asked if they had anything else to add about finding community as a clergywoman, and the answers echoed earlier narrative responses in the survey.

Finally, I asked how they have engaged with RevGalBlogPals.

Answers	Responses	Percentage
Facebook	595	76.48%
Twitter	61	7.84%
Website	359	46.14%
Continuing Education events	62	7.97%
Informal meet-ups	51	6.56%
Not at all	118	15.17%
Other	66	8.48%

Respondents were able to choose multiple answers. Descriptions of "other" included writing for our book, writing for the blog, reading some of our blogs, and never having heard of the organization.

While it is probably more project-adjacent than part of the project, I have been convicted by the slow pace of the organization and its spaces to become more racially integrated. It is noteworthy that a vanishingly small number of Black clergywomen and other Clergywomen of Color answered the survey, and a very tiny percentage attended the focus groups. While I have been actively inviting non-white and LGBTQ+ writers to contribute to our website, we simply don't see Black, Latinx, or Asian-American pastors at our events or informal meet-ups very often. With this in mind, and in light of the reading I did about intersectionality and the experience of Black women in ministry, I recommended a pro-active approach to bringing Women of Color into our community. We offered full scholarships to our next continuing education event (January, 2019), with a program led by the Rev. Dr. Wil Gafney of Brite Divinity School, on her book *Womanist Midrash*.

My collaborators on this project included members of my board, pastors who hosted the focus groups, and clergy colleagues who take an interest in women in ministry. I had hoped to meet with some professors at Columbia Theological Seminary in September, 2017, as part of the Guthrie Scholars program, but unfortunately I needed surgery early that month and was not permitted to fly for six weeks.

In the spring of 2018, I gathered a group of clergywomen to brainstorm a proposal for the Lilly Endowment's Thriving in Ministry grants, based on what I have been learning through my project. They included Minister Kentina Washington-Leapheart, Director of Programs for Reproductive Justice and Sexuality Education at the Religious Institute; the Rev. Sharon Temple, a retired United Church of Christ pastor and member of the board of RevGalBlogPals; the Rev. Jennifer Burns Lewis, Visioning and Connecting Leader for the Presbytery of Wabash Valley (PCUSA); the Rev. Beth Birkholz, pastor of Holy Cross Lutheran Church in Livonia, Michigan, and a yoga instructor; the Rev. Lisle Gwinn-Garrity, Presbyterian pastor, co-founder and Creative Director of A Sanctified Art; the Rev. Leila Ortiz, Assistant to the Bishop, Metro DC Synod ELCA; the Rev. Laura Stephens-Reed, Baptist pastor, clergy coach, and congregational consultant (and a past Louisville Institute Pastoral Study Project grant recipient); the Rev. Shaun Whitehead, chaplain at St. Lawrence University and a United Church of Christ pastor. We dreamed of a Beloved Community for clergywomen, inclusive, supportive, facilitated, and sustaining. We imagined cohort groups meeting for a week each year for spiritual renewal, leadership development, creative pursuits, and community building; we drew up a plan that would have them supported throughout the year by group and individual coaching. I wove a budget that would have allowed women

whose churches have limited resources, or for whom travel is burdensome due to living in isolated areas to participate fully. Sadly, we learned this past week that we did not receive the grant from Lilly.

Project Products

I expect to continue to work with the information I have gathered to write further about clergywomen's isolation, the varied ways they seek community, and the role online connection plays in their self-care, development of collegial relationships, and desire to remain in pastoral ministry. I am working on a book proposal and article pitches as I finish this report, both to such broad-based publications as the Christian Century and to denominational and seminary publications and websites.

I will use this report as the basis for a report to the board of my organization, to be shared at our November, 2018, meeting; it will include a recommendation for the coaching program mentioned in my project overview and described in more detail under project activities. A shorter version of the report will be published on my personal website (marthaspong.com) and on the organization's website (revgalblogpals.org).

Project Impact and Assessment

I consider the project to be ongoing as I am now headed back to the drawing board. I have learned, and will communicate to my board, that our "natural" audience of women who share information with each other seems to leave out the non-white members of our online community. It is also possible that Black clergywomen and other Women of Color in our extended community do not feel sure that our face-to-face

programs will truly include them. We have some work to do at the board level and with our other volunteer leaders to recognize that although we are theoretically all branches on the same vine, some branches are not getting that message. Only we can communicate it.

Project Reflection

Given the data collected in the survey and the anecdotal evidence from both the focus groups and the survey, I am drafting a plan to offer affordable group coaching for women serving in small and rural churches. I am inclined in that direction rather than to the women who named age as isolating because there are fine programs and spaces for connection already available for clergywomen in their 20s and 30s.

There are several ICF-certified coaches among our leaders, active members, and the group that worked with me on the Lilly proposal; they have all expressed interest in facilitating coaching groups if we should ever offer them. Group coaching has the advantage of spreading the cost between participants, as well as bringing small groups into relationship with one another through regular meetings. My initial thought is a package of sessions for six months, or a program year, with the option to renew. I would anticipate creating private Facebook spaces for group use as well. We might not be able to underwrite bringing rural clergy together face-to-face, but an ongoing, high-quality connection online is a great deal better than leaving clergywomen isolated.

On a personal note, I have become keenly aware of how isolated I felt when starting this project. When RevGalBlogPals began in 2005, I had great collegial support.

I was on the internet looking for connection with clergy moms, but that desire was for bonus relationships. I have not served a church since completing an interim in December, 2016. As the Executive Director of RevGalBlogPals, a clergy coach, and a writer, I work from a home office in what used to be the vestibule of the manse owned by the church my wife serves. I live in South Central Pennsylvania, where my denomination, the United Church of Christ, is much less progressive than the national church or in Maine, where I used to live and serve churches. My denominational colleagues here have not been welcoming. I live in a suburb of the state capital, with all the modern amenities, but in the UCC landscape, I might as well be on the top of a mountain or out in the remote countryside. I have Rheumatoid Arthritis, and my health is often a challenge to getting out into the world. We have one child living at home, my 13-year-old stepson, but my adult children live far away from me (in Los Angeles, Boston, and Tokushima, Japan). It is ironic, indeed, that as a person who identified collegiality as crucial for ministry from day one, and as someone who strives to create community for other clergywomen, I ended up feeling isolated myself and then withdrawing further.

Since beginning this project, I have rallied to make community for myself. I invited four colleagues into a monthly Zoom meeting where we discuss spiritual practices and vocational and personal concerns through the lens of the Enneagram. Traveling to spend time with friendly colleagues while leading focus groups had a tonic affect. I have spent time knitting at with friends at a local yarn store. I have started meeting another freelance writer - not a pastor - once a week to work in a coffee shop. My wife, who is head of staff of a large PCUSA congregation (and very busy), has become conscientious about making time for going out together, as well as arranging

social time with other couples. And I have developed a friendship with another mom, who does not need me to be her pastor, or her coach, just her friend. I am grateful for this opportunity, which has been life-changing for me, and which I hope will lead to life-changing collegiality for other clergywomen.

Selected Bibliography

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