

The Professional Journeys and Experiences in Leadership of Evangelical Lutheran Church in America Women Bishops

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Abstract

The Problem.

There are 70.5 million Lutherans in the world, with numbers increasing in Asia and Africa. Currently, only 14% of the Lutheran bishops are women, an increase from 10% in 2011. The role of bishop is a complex leadership position, requiring one to lead up to 150 churches and pastors in a geographical area. With more than 50% of the Lutheran church population comprised of women, their gender and voices are not being represented or heard at the highest levels of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). With one billion women projected to enter the workforce globally in the next two decades, more needs to be written and understood about women church leaders, such as Lutheran bishops. The purpose of this study was to explore the journeys of women who achieved the office of bishop, to glean what can be learned for the benefit of other women who might be called to these higher levels of leadership in the church.

The Solution.

This research suggests that 70% of the ELCA women bishops interviewed had unique career journeys, important spouse support, few women mentors, many challenges, and key leadership competencies required for the role. These findings can be helpful to future Lutheran and other Christian church leaders. It can help current and future women bishops understand what is expected in the role so they can be more successful in it. Leadership development recommendations are also suggested for seminary and higher education administrators and educators.

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The Stakeholders.

This research contributes to the literature in human resource development (HRD) by concentrating on the experiences of women leaders in the church—specifically women who have achieved the office of Bishop of the ELCA. The findings offer insights that can benefit scholars and practitioners alike, as well as current and future women leaders across the globe, in the church setting as well as other settings.

Keywords

women in leadership, Lutheran and Christian leaders, pastors and bishops, women bishops

In 2014, one of the authors researched women college presidents (Tunheim, McLean, & Goldschmidt, 2015). The author interviewed 15 college presidents across the country to learn about their experiences in the role. This result grew into a desire to discover whether women leaders in similarly related professions in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) church-wide organization have similar experiences or not.

The second author, a leadership development consultant for clergy, was interested in understanding what development was needed for women pastors to be considered for the office of bishop. The authors brought their interests together to conduct this research carried out by students in an organizational behavior undergraduate-level college course.

The first woman in the Lutheran church was ordained for pastoral leadership in 1970. In 1992, the first woman pastor was elected to the position of bishop of a synod within the ELCA. Currently, 14% of the bishops are women, which is an increase from 10% in 2011 (“ELCA.org/Facts,” 2015). Little to nothing has been written or published on the topic of women bishops in the ELCA and other denominations. However, much discussion has existed in the Anglican Church in England. For example, the Anglican Church voted favorably to ordain women 20 years ago, but it has been slow to place women in the bishop role. Today, there are approximately 30 active Anglican women bishops in the world with most serving in England but others in Australia, Canada, Cuba, India, New Zealand, Switzerland, South Africa, and the United States (Storey, 2014).

With one billion women projected to enter the workforce globally in the next two decades (Aguirre, 2012), more needs to be written and understood about women bishops, such that women in leadership positions might reflect the demographic makeup of their constituency.

History of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

The Lutheran church was born out of the University of Wittenberg in Germany almost 500 years ago (Simmons, 1996). In 1517, the Roman Church taught that one could get

out of punishment in purgatory for earthly sins by paying indulgences to the church. This money would go to pay for Roman cathedrals, among other things. After careful study, Martin Luther, a Benedictine Monk, realized the theology of the Roman Church was not in accord with the Bible. He believed we humans can do nothing to earn forgiveness for our sins. He believed it is given freely because of Jesus Christ's death and resurrection. Once he figured that out, he set out to reform the church by posting his 95 theses on the door of the Wittenberg Church. His writings were publicized all over Europe. The Protestants, as a group, were born, and the Reformation helped leaders gain independence from the Holy Roman Empire (Simmons, 1996).

Luther valued education for both young men and women—an attitude that was unique at the time! It has been said that he set a course for women in the church to be accepted into leadership positions. Because of his conviction, girls and women held atypical roles in the school, church, community, and family that are still evident today.

Immigrants were settling in the New World 200 to 300 years later. They established churches and seminaries to serve the Lutherans in the United States (Granquist, 2015). There were various sects of Lutherans, often associated with ethnic identity: German, Swedish, Norwegian, and Danish (Christenson, 2004; Dovre, 2006; Granquist, 2015; Simmons, 1996). The Lutheran church went through several consolidations over the centuries, finally arriving at the configuration today, with the ELCA being the largest Lutheran denomination.

Beginning in 1970, women began to serve as pastors in the Lutheran Church (Erling, 2010). Women teach and hold positions of leadership in Lutheran colleges, universities, and seminaries. Although more conservative branches of the Lutheran Church exist, the ELCA is the largest and only one open to women in positions of leadership in churches and educational institutions (Jodock, 2005).

Review of the Literature

A review of literature was undertaken to study work that has already been published about women bishops. Little was found about women in this role in any denomination, other than discussion about whether it is appropriate for women to hold the office of bishop or not. The Anglican Church of England has published the most literature recently about women bishops (Storey, 2014; Wyatt, 2015). Although more is written about women in lower level church leadership positions, such as pastor, it was not considered of sufficient relevance to include it in this article.

Current Reality for Women in Business, Government, and Higher Education

Research historically suggests that most organizations do not fully realize the value of having women in key positions, and this is the case across all sectors, including business, government, political, nonprofit, religious, community, and education (Catalyst, 2013). Organizations will increasingly thrive when both men and women hold management and leadership roles (Catalyst, 2013; Madsen, 2015).

According to The White House Project (TWHP, 2009), the report concluded that women, on average, held only 18% of the positional leaders across 10 sectors. In 2013, women averaged 19% of the positional leaders across 14 sectors (Colorado Women's College, 2013). Researchers also found that pay inequities continue to exist, even among the most senior-level women, in comparison with their male counterparts (Colorado Women's College, 2013).

In business, women hold a mere 4.6% of *Fortune* 500 chief executive officer positions (Catalyst, 2014). Women hold less than 15% of executive officer positions at *Fortune* 500 companies—and fully one quarter of these companies have no women serving in these positions at all (Rasmus, 2013). Women board members fare only slightly better, constituting about 16% of corporate boards (Catalyst, 2013). In addition, women hold just 8% of the top earning jobs in the country (Rasmus, 2013).

The numbers are better in government, but not by much. In 2013, women held just over 18% of the 535 seats in the U.S. Congress. They also held just over 23% of state-wide elected executive offices. Only 13% of the 100 largest cities in the United States had women mayors (Center for American Women and Politics, 2014).

Overall, researchers found continued increases in the numbers of women attending college and attaining degrees at most levels and slight improvements among certain leadership positions, yet not much significant improvement in the overall presence of women leaders or in their compensation (Gagnone & Lennon, 2014). More specifically, the 2013 report noted that although women represented 57% of all college students, women were only 10% of full professors and 25% of university presidents (Colorado Women's College, 2013).

History of Women Being Ordained as Lutheran Pastors

Forty-five years ago, women began to move slowly into the pulpits of the ELCA (Anderson, 2010). However, the path toward women's ordination is a long one that can be traced, as already noted, all the way back to Luther, who opened the world's minds to all people, men and women, having a vocational call (Paulson, 2004). He also introduced the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers, and rallied against the Roman captivity of the Mass, teaching us that it did not matter who gave the sacrament. After all, it is God who does the work through the Word. The word must simply be spoken by a human (Luther, 1520).

And yet, it would be hundreds of years before women played any significant role. In the 1800s when mission and missionaries were a focus of the church, women were pioneers, and perhaps gave people the first glimpse of what could be. They were leaders in missionary endeavors, and even preached while on mission. It should not be ignored that in 1885, the Icelandic Evangelical Lutheran Synod of America was the first Lutheran denomination to allow women to vote and hold office in their organizations (Granquist, 2015).

Lutherans first asked the question about women's ordination in 1938, in the Church of Norway. At that time, they voted to allow it, but the first ordination was not for another quarter century. Ordination in the United States was not considered until the 1950s, and then only seriously in the 1960s (Grindle, 1995).

Not long after the momentous occasion of finally voting to allow ordination for women, Elizabeth Platz was ordained as the first woman pastor in the Lutheran Church of America (LCA) denomination on November 22, 1970. Barbara Andrews would follow in the American Lutheran Church (ALC) denomination 1 month later. It would be years before a woman would be elected to bishop of a synod. April Larson was elected in June 1992, the first woman Bishop in the ELCA, and it would not be until 2013 that Elizabeth Eaton would be elected Presiding Bishop over the ELCA (“ELCA.org/Facts,” 2015).

History of Women Being Elected as Lutheran Bishops

Just as women have become successful leaders in the workplace, they have also attempted to bridge the gender gap of leadership in the church. Since the ELCA formed, women’s participation has increased in both scholarship and leadership in the church (LaHurd, 2008). In the years leading up to the inclusion of women pastors and bishops, women’s roles and abilities as leaders in the church were often questioned. The exclusion was originally based on the fact that Jesus was male. In 2009, women only made up 13.9% of clergy members in the United States (Middleton & Hinton, 2009). One female pastor even had to go through additional education to convince her school’s board she was worthy of ordination (Bammert, 2010).

The change, however slow, has been positive. On April 4, 1992, Maria Jepsen of Hamburg, Germany was elected the first Lutheran bishop worldwide. Later that same year, April Ulring Larson of La Crosse, Wisconsin was elected the first Lutheran bishop in the United States (Houston, 1992). Jepsen and Larson paved the way for other women to do the same. Since then, more women have joined these leaders as bishops, and doors continue to open for women bishops around the world. As a religious leader, Roy Bourgeois stated, “The demand for gender equality is rooted in justice and dignity and will not go away” (Grundy 2012, p. 14).

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework used in this study is learning organization theory. Senge (1990) and Watkins and Marsick (1996) all proposed that for an organization to become a learning organization, it must learn from both its successes and failures. For the ELCA organization to become a learning organization, it, too, must learn from both its successes and failures. Women bishops as administrators of the ELCA must learn from the experiences of other leaders. This study, then, focused on the lessons to be learned from a specific group of church leaders—ELCA women bishops.

Purpose of the Study

With more people leaving the ELCA church roster and more women moving into administrative roles (Bloomquist, 2010), it is imperative that current or future women bishops learn from those who have served in the role before them. Their journeys are

unique, and other women leaders can learn from these bishops' paths. This is the purpose of the investigation.

Research Method and Methodology

In this section, we describe the research design and methodology, the participants, the data collection process, and the data analysis. The study was conducted under the guidelines and approval of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Gustavus Adolphus College.

Research Design/Method

In this study, we used a survey sent by email to the six current women ELCA bishops and four past bishops. Five of the six presiding bishops and two of the four retired bishops responded to the survey using the Delphi Technique (Dalkey & Helmer, 1963). Telephone interviews were set up for the six who responded initially, which averaged 45 min long.

Participant Selection and Characteristics

A list of current presiding bishops and past retired bishops was retrieved from the "ELCA.org/Facts" (2015) website. A letter was sent to each one via email inviting them to participate in the study. The communication provided them with a description of the study, its purpose, the benefits and risks, a guarantee of anonymity, and a request to audiotape the follow-up interview. One presiding bishop and two retired bishops did not respond at all to the email invitation.

Data Collection

All seven participants who participated in the email survey also participated in the interview. Six of the seven respondents participated in the interview via telephone from all over the United States. One respondent participated in a face-to-face interview due to close proximity. The questions of the email survey included the following: When were you born? What age were you when you became a bishop? How would you characterize your personality and leadership style? What qualities do you think are necessary to becoming a bishop? Why do you think there are so few women bishops in the ELCA? Is there anything else you would like to share?

The telephone interviews followed Merriam's (2009) qualitative research practices. Interviewees gave permission to have the telephone conversations recorded. All respondents were asked the same questions. The questions asked during the telephone and one face-to-face interview included: Tell us your story. How did you come into ministry and then become a bishop? What was this process like? Did you feel that it was your calling? Did you have any mentors? What were those experiences like? Tell us about

those relationships. What are some of the biggest challenges you face as a bishop and how do you overcome them? What do you like most about being a bishop? What do you think are the most important leadership characteristics as a woman bishop and why? What advice would you give to other women striving for the role?

Data Analysis

The email survey data were coded using the Delphi Technique (Dalkey & Helmer, 1963) and theme analysis for the open-ended questions.

The audiotapes of the telephone interviews were transcribed. The first author read the survey data and interview transcripts 4 times. The first two readings focused on understanding the data. Giorgi (1997) suggested that this critical assessment allows the researcher to understand how the data parts are constituted. Themes began to emerge during the third reading of the texts. During the fourth and final reading, the highlighted lines were documented from the texts and later categorized by theme and participant. The second author read all of the data 3 times, reviewed the themes, and offered revisions. The students involved in the data collection read through the findings as well and offered a few minor suggestions. Themes were revised until all eight researchers agreed on them unanimously. The findings from this mixed methods research are as follows.

Findings

When comparing the stories of the participants, we found many similarities. These similarities included the women being told they could not be bishops, feeling a specific calling to ministry, and having strong supporting casts. Many of these female bishops grew up with different ideas of their future endeavors. Specifically, becoming a bishop was not something they had planned, but a common theme was a desire to be in ministry. However, these women faced many limitations because the Lutheran Church did not ordain women.

An analysis of the survey results and interview transcripts resulted in the identification of five main themes: (a) The Journey, (b) Spouse Support, (c) Mentors, (d) Challenges Faced, and (e) Required Leadership Competencies. These five themes helped us understand the experiences of these Lutheran women bishops from their perspectives.

The Journey

The journeys of the seven bishops were varied, yet they had one thing in common: They all felt called to the role of pastor and bishop. One woman stated,

I was one of the first women ordained in the ELCA. I had never met a woman pastor before. I woke up one morning with a desire to go to seminary, just like that. It wasn't like a vision; it was like an enthusiasm, a burning kind of desire.

Another woman reported that it was kind of a rebellious thing for her to do:

When I was a kid growing up, our church did not ordain women. But when I was in confirmation class, I guess I didn't know that the church didn't ordain women. When the pastor was talking about different things people could do in the church, I decided that I wanted to be a pastor and told him so. He got incredibly uncomfortable and told me I couldn't . . . which made me think, ok then, this is a great idea! Let's do it.

Another bishop explained her journey and sense of calling along the way:

My eighth grade guidance counselor told me that Lutherans do not ordain women. But I do remember we had a woman who was the assistant campus chaplain at my college. I had never seen a woman in ministry before. She [met with a group of friends of mine and me] in her apartment to talk over the big questions in life. From that group a lot of us really sensed a call to ministry. I knew this was it and this is what I was supposed to be doing.

In addition to the call into ministry, the women emphasized the importance of the call to becoming a bishop. The bishops made it clear that there are not specific prerequisites to achieving the rank of bishop, like you would see on a job description or ad. A common remark made by these women was, "You cannot want to be a bishop; you have to be called." Becoming a bishop was not something that these women actively pursued.

Spouse Support

All of the women interviewed indicated that the support from their spouses meant a great deal to them. One woman reflected,

My husband was a seminarian at the time, so I was familiar with the seminary. While there, we got married during his internship. He was very supportive of me going to the seminary, but no one else was. My husband was the only one who supported my desire to become a pastor. No one had ever heard of a married couple where both were pastors before!

Another woman had to be convinced by her husband even to allow her name to be considered on the ballot for bishop:

The idea of being a bishop was not really very appealing to me. I figured it meant doing the worst parts of parish ministry like lots of committee meetings and dealing with conflict. I didn't want to do that. I remember my husband was really enthusiastic and he thought this would be a great idea. "Yes, you should do this," he said.

Supportive spouses made a positive difference for women candidates considering the bishop role.

Mentors

The seven bishops discussed the role mentors played in their journey. All had mentors, but only two of seven had female mentors. One bishop looked to other professional fields to find female role models. One bishop explained her unique situation:

I had no female mentors . . . not even one. Male mentors, yes, I had them. One guy just pushed me to do things I would not have dared do myself. He gave me opportunities.

Another bishop discussed how a woman lawyer helped her along the way in an informal mentoring relationship:

A woman who was a senior partner in my husband's law firm recommended that I go where a woman had already served so that I could learn my craft rather than having to spend all my time defending my gender. I've learned a great deal from women who have found ways to succeed in a hostile environment, whether it's the church or the law.

A third bishop related the challenge of mentoring other women today:

At times I feel guilty because I want to be mentoring more women but I am also the first woman to be a bishop in my synod. I have to be really attentive to what I am doing because if I fail it's going to be harder for other women who try to become a bishop after me. It's the same when a woman pastor has failed in a church. The church is less likely to get a woman after that. If a man fails, he can be easily replaced with another man. It's a very different kind of pressure for a woman.

All seven women interviewed had been mentored, primarily by men, and mentor other women as much as time allows.

Challenges Faced

The challenges these women described in their experiences included an immense volume of workload in the role, sexism, and personal issues that appeared along the way. Five respondents mentioned the large volume of work.

The biggest challenge is always being on alert. I never feel like I'm off-duty, because I could get a phone call, text or email from someone about something bad that happened in my synod. The volume of work combined with the stress of being hyper-alert is something all of the bishops are struggling with in this job.

Half discussed how, as a church, people are still not accustomed to seeing women in the role. As one of the women described it, women bishops "have a stained glass ceiling in the church that is as real as the regular glass ceiling in corporate life." When discussing the small population of women bishops in the ELCA, many of these women believe that the cultural norm of seeing a man in front of a congregation has stunted

the growth of potential female bishops. Another bishop said, “As a church, we are still not accustomed to picturing women in the role of bishop.” Gender still plays a powerful role when it comes to electing women bishops. Sexism is something that these women feel is holding them back, and it is something they face often in their religious settings. Yet another bishop described her feelings on this topic relative to other denominations:

I believe that the overall male-oriented/patriarchal nature of the faith and especially the institution is probably the largest challenge for women—and it’s not just in the ELCA. When the pronoun “he” is used most frequently to refer to God, it is hard to overcome the sense that men are the most appropriate leaders for the church—whether that sense is spoken or unspoken, conscious or sub-conscious.

In the struggle to be taken seriously and given respect, one bishop explained that when a male bishop walks into a congregation, he is given respect. A female bishop must earn that respect. The women spoke about how they were eventually given the respect they deserved and earned but felt the need to be twice as competent as any male to be seen as equal. One bishop referenced a time when a woman in her congregation told her that she should wear her collar more often to better blend in with the male bishops. Many of the bishops, in their first few years in office, confessed they lacked confidence when handling issues within the church. These women had to work hard at constantly managing unexpected and difficult situations to earn respect.

One bishop described the addition of all of the other changes occurring in the ELCA at the time as adding to gender prejudice:

In my conversations with other women who are bishops, some of the hysteria from congregations that vehemently opposed opening up the church to gay and lesbian people, then also kind of moved into anti-women stuff. In addition to the homophobia, there was kind of a misogyny that entered the picture. It wasn’t just, “what are you doing to my church” but “what’s a girl like you think you’re doing to my church?!?”

We found the church’s process of electing bishops to be another challenging factor for women. The process is quite different from other executive leadership roles in a business setting or higher education. It leads back to male authoritarian institutions that are not proactive in nominating women who feel they are being called to these executive levels. Although some women have gained seniority and expertise in the same areas as their male counterpart, they are still less likely to be elected bishop on an ecclesiastical ballot. To be nominated for bishop, one has to show that he or she has managed a large staff, a large budget, conflict resolution, strategic planning, and public engagement necessary for the position. Three bishops stated that, at times, women have to work twice as hard to be perceived as equal to their male peers.

A final comment that summarizes the current situation between male and female bishops, and males and females in church leadership in general, is as follows:

Almost without exception, my brother bishops were supportive of me personally. But generally they seemed blind to the power of the male authoritarian and patriarchal systems of the institutional church that override personal situations and create a preference for male leadership.

Personal challenges appear at times, too, for bishops, as this individual described when new to her role:

Within the first 18 months of my being elected bishop, my mother died, my father died, my brother almost died, my ex-husband almost died, two friends died, and my former mother-in-law died. Of course, I had power of attorney for half of them. We also had a murder in our synod, which was on Dateline/NBC. It was just insane. Then we went into the sexuality debates for the next three years and then the economy went into a recession!

This bishop later stated how she had to work differently than in the past to just survive; it resulted in positive circumstances:

I was so overwhelmed I had to set up teams because I couldn't possibly handle all of my responsibilities with all of these terrible things happening. It actually turned out to be the best blessing for the whole synod because it strengthened the entire network. It wasn't dependent on me. It's now a much healthier synod, less bishop-centered and less people asking me what they should do every minute.

Commonalities in the Role

Being a strong leader is critical for a Lutheran bishop to be successful. A number of leadership commonalities emerged in the study. Three stood out in the survey and interview data: being a bishop is not typically a career goal; leadership competencies such as thinking on your feet, strong public speaking, and flexibility are required; and attending to relationships is a positive part of the job.

The women reported that becoming a bishop is not something to which one strives. One of the women said,

I think striving to be bishop never works for anybody. Being bishop is not a career goal! The way we elect bishops is an ecclesiastical ballot. It's not like a job search. You need to be in the right place at the right time with the right people nominating you.

Another bishop stated similarly,

Some of the women I have known who were striving to be bishops would not have made very good ones. Despite sexism and patriarchal systems, I believe that the Holy Spirit still calls us, through the church, into this office.

The seven bishops offered many leadership qualities that are needed in the role to be successful. A few were repeated often:

A bishop must be able to think on her feet, be able to speak extemporaneously, and be flexible. She needs to be self-aware, exhibit a strong faith, have a deep love for Scripture, and be a person of prayer. She should be able to recruit, equip and encourage leaders and be able to raise money.

Another woman agreed and added a few other key skills vital to the job:

Being a bishop requires strong public speaking and listening skills, lots of endurance and thick skin! It is an arduous job and one that is not suited to someone who always wants to be liked.

A few other skills included honesty, ambition, patience, compassion, support, and authenticity.

Five of the seven bishops indicated that they are extroverted based on their Myers Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) results. Extroverts typically get their energy from the outer world of people and things, while introverts are motivated by the inner world of ideas and images. All seven have the preference for intuition (the N in the four-letter code), signifying they are more abstract thinkers as compared with someone with a more practical approach to thinking. Finally, four of the seven present as T (thinking) decision makers as opposed to F (feeling) decision makers (myersbriggs.org, 2016). It is possible that one reason the majority of these women made it to the office of bishop is their decision-making style.

All seven bishops shared a positive sense of relationship that is key to the position. The first woman talked about working with people locally:

I like it when I get to visit all the congregations. I visit at least 30 to 40 churches a year. It is really fun to see all the people and worship with them.

Another bishop talked about her relationships with people in her synod on a larger scale:

I really like the ability to make connections. I travel a lot. I appreciate being able to connect with what's going on locally in my congregations, nationally in our country and globally in the world. I'm not sure I really understood that when I was elected into the role.

Another woman expressed a similar surprise:

I love people so this job is easy for me. I like visionary leadership. I like to direct people in a positive direction. I think it was quite surprising to me how global being a bishop is in the ELCA. I thought I was being elected to be bishop in my synod but you're really elected bishop of the whole global church, not only just America. I have had some amazing opportunities to travel to Africa, Israel, Czech Republic, to the Vatican, Turkey and to England. I have had the privilege of getting to meet people I would never have met otherwise.

Discussion

In this section, we discuss a possible theoretical framework that fits the results of our study, and we compare the results of our study with the literature.

Theoretical Framework

Eagly and Kurau's (2002) Role Congruity Theory of Prejudice toward female leaders may provide a theoretical framework for this study. They suggested,

A role congruity theory of prejudice toward female leaders proposes that perceived incongruity between the female gender role and leadership roles leads to two forms of prejudice: (a) perceiving women less favorably than men as potential occupants of leadership roles and (b) evaluating behavior that fulfills the prescriptions of a leader role less favorably when it is enacted by a woman. One consequence is that attitudes are less positive toward female than male leaders and potential leaders. Other consequences are that it is more difficult for women to become leaders and to achieve success in leadership roles. Evidence from varied research paradigms substantiates that these consequences occur, especially in situations that heighten perceptions of incongruity between the female gender role and leadership roles. (p. 1)

ELCA women bishops challenge the typical male patriarchal bishop role. Thus, when women become bishops, they confront the gender role stereotypes in the culture and often experience prejudice.

Reflections on Findings and the Literature

Becoming a female bishop in the ELCA is something that very few have ever accomplished. Because women were not ordained in the ELCA until 1970, there just aren't very many available in the pool for selection. Currently, there are nine female bishops out of 65 throughout the United States (Personal communication, Linda Post Bushkofky, Executive Director, Women of the ELCA, August 6, 2015). These women have had many unique experiences on their paths to becoming who they are today.

The call to ministry took these women bishops in many directions. The research from women in higher education, including college presidents, suggests they feel called to the role from many different directions as well (Longman, Dahlvig, Wikkerink, Cunningham, & O'Connor, 2011; Tunheim & Goldschmidt, 2013). However, in the most recent article published on women college presidents and calling (Tunheim, McLean, & Goldschmidt, 2015), even women leaders not situated at church-related institutions felt called to the position as well.

Spousal support was critical to these women's elections as bishop because others in the church were denouncing women in that role. This could be due to the fact that it had never been done before. It can be difficult to imagine something that has never before been part of a particular worldview. This compares similarly to women college presidents. Research suggests their spouses can make or break a presidency. Women

college presidents report their spouses' support is invaluable and much appreciated (Oden, 2004; Smith, 2001; Smith & Helms, 1994; Vaughan, 1986). In both roles, the bishop and college president, the support from their spouses gave them the courage and motivation to achieve their rank and excel in the role.

Professional mentor relationships are a key development component for all people, and especially women who are achieving ranks of higher leadership. The research on women college presidents' leadership development also points to the importance of mentoring and sponsorship (Longman & Madsen, 2014; Madsen, 2008; Moore Brown, 2005). Tunheim and McLean (2015) found that two thirds of the women presidents they interviewed explained they had been mentored to the role of presidents. This is significantly higher than the ELCA women bishops. However, 26% of all college presidents were female (American Council on Education, 2012), whereas only 14% of bishops are currently female. It may take more time with more women in the role of bishop before more mentoring from women can occur.

Women bishops reported that they have to work twice as hard to be perceived as equal to their male peers. This impression is not dissimilar from women executives in a business setting or higher education (Zenger & Folkman, 2012). Working twice as hard to gain credibility and respect is consistent with women leaders in every field.

One key difference for the women bishops in this study is that they are not mentored to prepare to become bishops one day. Women in higher education and business are encouraged to prepare to serve as college presidents or corporate executives if they gain the experience along the way (Bornstein, 2002, 2014; Eagly & Carli, 2007; Gerzema & D'Antonio, 2013; Madsen, 2008; Morgan & Skelton, 2015; Rezvani, 2010; Sandberg, 2013; Switzer, 2006; Tunheim & Goldschmidt, 2013). Either the selection process for bishops is so unique or the humility of the role requires women bishops to think this way is not certain.

The list of leadership qualities provided by the seven respondents in this study is consistent with other leadership development literature written by and for women in higher education and business. In this study, the list of leadership qualities included honesty, ambition, patience, compassion, support, authenticity, public speaking, listening, conflict resolution, self-awareness, being thick skinned, and having the ability to stand strong against and with others (cannot be a push-over). This is consistent with other executive leadership roles (Bornstein, 2002, 2014; Eagly & Carli, 2007; Gerzema & D'Antonio, 2013; Madsen, 2008; Morgan & Skelton, 2014; Rezvani, 2010; Sandberg, 2013; Switzer, 2006; Tunheim & Goldschmidt, 2013).

The need to attend well to relationships, which all the bishops indicated they enjoy in the job, is also consistent with other leaders in higher education and for-profit business (Bornstein, 2002, 2014; Eagly & Carli, 2007; Gerzema & D'Antonio, 2013; Madsen, 2008; Morgan & Skelton, 2014; Rezvani, 2010; Sandberg, 2013; Switzer, 2006; Tunheim & Goldschmidt, 2013). The bishops especially enjoyed working with many different types of people, traveling locally and globally, and feeling as if they are making a difference in not only their ELCA church but also the world.

Implications for HRD Practice

The need for leadership programs specifically targeting women church leaders is evidenced by the testimonials of women pastors and bishops. Until women are represented equally at the top levels of the church, seminaries, higher educational institutions, and HRD professionals need to be focused on advancing women in the church and the workplace.

HRD professionals ought to learn from the experiences from these women bishops so they can help not just women in the church, but other women leaders in business, government, and higher education. HRD professionals ought not only to design leadership development programs for this audience but also to develop mentoring programs for other women in different sectors. The women bishops in this article received little mentoring by other women as there were few to none in the role. Mentoring can make a significant difference to a new bishop, as well as one experienced in the role.

Recommendations for Future HRD Research

More needs to be written and published on the experiences and leadership lessons learned by women church leaders. Nothing is published on the topic of Lutheran women bishops. As these women leaders retire and reflect on their terms as bishops, their intellectual capital will disappear unless they document their experiences. As more women become leaders in the ELCA, we can expect a growing percentage of female bishops. Thus, learning from current ELCA women bishops can be very useful for them in leading their synods. This research can help prepare other women for the role of ELCA bishop and help them avoid mistakes learned in previous bishop-ships to ensure greater success.

To understand the bishop experience even more, it would also be valuable to investigate the male bishops' experiences within the ELCA. By comparing the different genders' experiences, it would be possible to understand better the different career paths taken by men and women within the church, in case that pointed to significant information in terms of developing high-capacity women who might be capable of holding the office of bishop one day.

More research into decision-making and conflict styles and their import to the office of bishop could be undertaken. An investigation of both male and female bishops could be undertaken to discover decision-making styles and possible gender implications.

This study was conducted in the ELCA only. As women bishops become more common in other church denominations, it would be useful to replicate this study in other church bodies, and, ultimately, to conduct comparative research among denominations.

Conclusion

A few women bishops summed up their feelings about their overall experience serving as an ELCA bishop:

My election as bishop was one of the most spiritual and genderless experiences of my life. I was fully supported throughout my time in office. I can only hope that the same spirit can find room to grow and lead the church in other places in the ELCA.

I truly hope this research is able to lift up some of what women pastors have done to pave the way for women's leadership in our church.

I am just so grateful to those who have come before me—other women serving as bishops. We have a commitment of prayer and support for each other.

The women who are called to serve as ELCA bishops have had meaningful experiences and learned lessons along their journeys of leadership. The results of this study suggest the bishop role is both challenging and rewarding. Preparing women leaders in the church to understand the role of bishop, and what success looks like, before they take on the role, is critically important for the future of the ELCA locally, nationally, and globally.

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