Why Women Pastors?

"A woman in charge of a Catholic parish? You've got to be kidding."

"I can't imagine it in my wildest dreams! You must be talking about something happening on another planet, or at least in another country."

"Well, I can assure you that I've never experienced or heard of such a thing, and I've been a churchgoing Catholic all my life."

These reactions are typical of what I heard over and over again from people who listened as I described my research, a study of women administering priestless parishes in the United States. Many Catholics, particularly those living in the northeastern part of the United States, are unaware of the priest shortage, which is particularly acute in rural areas in the Midwest, the South, and western regions of this country.¹ Though these same Catholics may have heard of dioceses where the bishop has decided to close some parishes because of staffing problems, they were not cognizant of other alternatives like this one, now available to bishops.

Given the patriarchal structure of the Catholic church, and the conservative stance of the current members of the Roman Curia² regarding the role of women in the church, one would not expect to see women appointed to significant leadership positions. The women I interviewed have been entrusted by their bishops with the pastoral care of parishes where there are
no resident priests. In this capacity these women exercise overall responsibility in the parish for worship, education, pastoral services, and administration.

When, why, and how did it happen that Catholic bishops can appoint lay people, even women, as administrators of priestless parishes? This chapter provides a fourfold answer. First we look at the Second Vatican Council and subsequent changes in church law, and then we turn to the remaining facilitating factors, demographic changes and the contemporary women’s movement, before describing my research.

**THE IMPACT OF THE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL**

Shortly after Pope John XXIII was elected pope, he expressed his desire to bring about some changes in the church that would allow for better adaptation to modern society, changes which he referred to as *aggiornamento*, an updating or modernization, that would result in an opening of the “windows of the church” to the contemporary world.\(^3\) To that end he convened all Catholic bishops throughout the world for the Second Vatican Council. These council sessions took place in Rome for approximately three months, from September through November, for four consecutive years, beginning in 1962 and ending with the fourth session in 1965.

The central participants in the Vatican Council deliberations from 1962 to 1965 were the 2,540 bishops and a few male heads of religious orders who had voting rights. In addition, there were approximately 450 priests invited as experts (*periti*), and some Protestant observers and representatives from non-Christian religions, all of whom were men.\(^4\) These experts were allowed to be present at the Council deliberations but had no voting rights.

Beginning with the second session of the Council in 1963, a few lay auditors were also invited. By the end of Council deliberations in 1965, there were twelve laywomen, ten religious women, and twenty-seven laymen from different parts of the world present in Rome and participating as auditors.\(^5\) These forty-nine lay auditors were present during the Council deliberations, but they had no vote and they could not speak, except at
the various commission meetings held all over Rome. The list of auditors included one woman and two men from the United States: Sister Mary Luke Tobin, the mother general of the Sisters of Loretto, James Norris, and Martin H. Work. There were also a few well-known American Catholic laywomen, such as Dorothy Day, Patricia Crowley, Abigail McCarthy, and Mary Daly, present at peripheral activities, like the noontime Council summary and the daily press briefings on the Council debates. Some women were also present at public talks given occasionally by eminent theologians, and a few women could be seen at occasional weekend conferences and informal gatherings at Roman restaurants.

Some of my personal observations in Rome during the fourth session of the Council in 1965 may be helpful for an understanding of a woman’s “place” during the Council.6 There were many dramatic displays of patriarchal symbolism. An unforgettable sight, for instance, was the daily convergence of hundreds of bishops from all over the world dressed in their colorful regalia at the doors of St. Peter’s Church. No layperson could be seen among them because the front entrance was reserved solely for the voting members of the Council. Women who were not auditors participated in the Council itself only by attending the Mass celebrated before each day’s Council session. However, they were instructed to leave immediately after the liturgy, because only bishops, periti, auditors, and staff could be present for the Council deliberations. (There were some mornings when we felt we were literally being shoved out of St. Peter’s, like uninvited guests at a party, because the church ushers pointed to the door while announcing in very loud and insistent voices, “Exeunt omnes,” indicating that we were to exit immediately.)

During Council deliberations, the authorized presence of twenty-two women auditors and a total of approximately three thousand men afforded women a very low profile at best. In addition, a woman’s voice was never heard during the Council deliberations because of the limitations placed on the role of auditor. In general, women were virtually invisible and entirely silent when decisions were made regarding important structural changes affecting all members of the church.7
Vatican II Documents and Their Implementation

A perusal of the Vatican II documents reveals that there were only a few instances where any attention was given to the contribution of women to the church. Given the invisibility and silence of women during the Council, it is not surprising that women’s issues are seldom addressed in the documents themselves, even in the document on the laity that was supposedly addressed to laywomen and laymen alike.

However, one statement in the document on the laity that was inserted only during the final drafting, reads: “Since in our times women have an ever active share in the whole life of society, it is very important that they participate more widely also in the various fields of the Church’s apostolate.”

How was this Council statement regarding women’s increasing participation implemented? There were some women in important positions before the Second Vatican Council convened in 1962. In fact, looking back historically to the medieval Christian church we can point to abbesses who wielded a considerable amount of power over priests and bishops. Many people will be surprised to learn that some or all of the following rights and duties belonged to abbesses: licensing bishops to exercise pontifical rites in her district; licensing priests to say Mass in her churches; absolving in cases of excommunication; walking in front of the clergy and carrying the pastoral cross in processions; establishing new parishes; holding places in councils with a rank above the clergy; reading the gospel; suspending clergy subject to her; and even, at one time, hearing confessions and preaching in public. It is all the more amazing to realize that this quasi-episcopal status of abbesses did not come to an end until after the French Revolution in the late eighteenth century.

In the period just prior to the convening of Vatican II women could be found in such important positions as administrators of Catholic hospitals, presidents of Catholic women’s colleges, and principals of Catholic high schools and grammar schools. However, these were not viewed as strictly “clerical” roles, and the vast majority of women occupying these positions were members of religious communities.

In those sections of the world where bishops and priests
encouraged the laity to participate more actively in the post-Vatican II era, some women gradually assumed more prominent roles. At the parish level they accepted new ministerial roles such as lectors, eucharistic ministers, acolytes (altar servers), and directors of religious education. A study of Catholic parishes in the United States twenty years after the Council found that fifty-two percent of the members of parish councils, sixty percent of eucharistic ministers, and half of the lectors were women. The response of the laity has been largely supportive of this trend. When asked who were the “most influential parishioners,” exclusive of the pastors, the respondents produced a list that was fifty-eight percent women.

In our national study of the laity we found that a majority of Catholics think laymen and women should have the right to participate in the following areas which pertain to parish life: deciding how parish income should be spent (eighty percent agreed); giving occasional sermons at Mass (sixty-nine percent agreed); deciding whether to have altar girls (sixty-six percent agreed); being in charge of a parish when the priest is absent (sixty-five percent agreed); and selecting the priests for their parish (fifty-seven percent said they should have this right).

Prior to Vatican II, women were excluded from such roles as students or faculty members in seminaries. It was only after the Vatican Council ended in 1965 that women were admitted to schools of theology for ministerial preparation. Before 1965, then, only those priests who went to college before entering the seminary had the experience of a college education that included women as students and/or teachers. Before the Council ended, most future priests studied for their college degrees in seminaries or schools of theology, where the only women visible were the “good Sisters” who did the cooking, laundering, and other housekeeping tasks. Thus many Catholic priests today, as well as most of the bishops, have had little experience beyond high school in working with women as intellectual equals.

The admission of women students to Roman Catholic schools of theology has resulted in an influx of women ministerial candidates. At the present time, approximately one-fourth of the students enrolled in Roman Catholic theological schools in the United States are women.
Training in theology certainly enhanced a woman's chances of being appointed to positions that were formerly reserved to the clergy, such as superintendents of schools, chancellors of dioceses, canon lawyers, professors in seminaries, directors of Catholic charities, editors of diocesan newspapers, chaplains, spiritual guides and leaders in retreats and Bible studies, and even, as we shall see, as administrators of priestless parishes. Since the percentage of women entering seminaries as students is on an upward trend, we may expect that the daily interaction among these women, their fellow students, and coworkers will have a positive influence on the attitudes and future behavior of these seminarians and priests as they become pastors of parishes and administrators in chancery offices.

Prior to Vatican II, many of the new activities currently assumed by lay people were restricted to the clergy by church law, thus conferring a legitimacy and seeming immutability to the existing structure. We turn now to a discussion of the ensuing revisions of the Code of Canon Law necessitated by the decisions emanating from this historic Council which ultimately sanctioned far-reaching changes, particularly for women's roles in the church.

The New Code of Canon Law

Realizing the importance of changes in church law for the implementation of Vatican Council decisions, Pope John XXIII called for the revision of Canon Law in 1959. The new Code of Canon Law, promulgated in 1983, made some provisions for the expansion of women's roles in the church. While still excluding women from the ordained ministry, the new code opened the following positions to women on the diocesan level: diocesan chancellors, auditors, assessors, defenders of the marriage bond, promoters of justice, judges on diocesan courts, and members of diocesan synods and financial and pastoral councils.

The legal change that opened the door for the recruitment of women as pastoral administrators in priestless parishes can be found in this revised code. In recognition of the priest shortage, the new code included a provision for people other than priests to exercise pastoral care, that is, to perform some of the duties of
the pastor in a parish. The new canon (or ruling), 517.2, reads thus:

If the diocesan bishop should decide that due to a dearth of priests a participation in the exercise of the pastoral care of a parish is to be entrusted to a deacon or to some other person who is not a priest, or to a community of persons, he is to appoint some priest endowed with the power and faculties of a pastor, to supervise the pastoral care.17

For women, of course, the inclusionary clause in the wording of canon 517.2 is "some other person who is not a priest," because women cannot be ordained as priests or deacons. This could be viewed as a Pandora's box for the church, because the wording of this new law opened the door for female leadership on the parish level, and consequently created a new role for women in the Catholic church.

As in other complex organizations, the process of canon law revision involved a number of stages. Committees made up of bishops and canon lawyers (all males) spent many years analyzing the decrees of Vatican II, and then making the necessary changes in church law in order to bring the Code of Canon Law in line with the Vatican II documents. The earliest version of canon 517.2, published in 1977, was sent to the Catholic hierarchy and other consultative bodies of the church throughout the world in 1978. After observations of these groups were forwarded to the Vatican office, discussions on this proposed canon took place on April 19, 1980. As expected, some of the discussants in Rome "did not welcome the notion that a parish be entrusted, even in part," to a nonordained person.18

It was the intervention of Archbishop Rosalio Jose Castillo Lara from Venezuela that was the turning point in this deliberation.19 He told the committee about the experience in his own diocese, where the priest shortage was particularly acute, and where the pastoral care of some communities was entrusted to nuns. Archbishop Castillo Lara expressed satisfaction with this arrangement, and he also argued that it was spiritually fruitful. This intervention by a Third World bishop was what finally convinced the committee, and the proposed canon was approved. If the earlier arguments of some of the committee members had
prevailed, the inclusionary clause would have been deleted.

Thus, in 1983 when the new Code of Canon Law was promulgated, the door was opened for the appointment of women to a role that had previously been closed to them. Since canon 517.2 stipulates that a priest must be appointed to moderate the pastoral care provided by lay people, how radical a change is this, after all? Catholics who were parishioners before the decrees of Vatican II were promulgated can answer that, for they will remember that women were always seen but never heard in church, except as choir members. In fact, this author can recall being told by a priest in the early 1960s that it was a “mortal sin” for a woman to be present in the sanctuary (altar area) of the church during Mass. In the past twenty-five years, however, Catholic women had begun gradually to participate in parish roles which required their presence in the sanctuary during Mass, such as lectors (reading scripture), eucharist ministers (distributing communion), altar servers, and most recently, since the promulgation of canon 517.2, as administrators of priestless parishes.

The answer to the question, “Why Women Pastors?” is only partly answered by pointing to Vatican II changes and the revision of the Code of Canon Law. For a more complete answer to this question, we need to look at some external factors as well.

DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGES AND THE CONTEMPORARY WOMEN’S MOVEMENT

Important demographic changes in the United States and the contemporary women’s movement are the external factors that have expedited women’s entrance into new roles in the church. Chief among the external demographic changes are women’s greater participation in the labor force, their increased rate of college attendance, and their completion of postgraduate degrees.20

Concurrently, broad changes in external demographics are affecting the internal demographics of the Catholic church. The increasing shortage of priests is an example of these internal changes, and it is a key factor in the appointment of women to church positions that had previously been reserved solely for

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priests. Like the subject of the song, "Rosie the Riveter," written during the Second World War, women are being recruited to help out in a manpower shortage crisis. Appointing women as chancellors of dioceses, as canon lawyers in the diocesan tribunal, and as administrators of parishes can free priests for other diocesan needs, just as women working in factories freed male factory workers to fight in World War II.

The priest shortage is already in the crisis stage in some dioceses, as Schoenherr's national study indicates. With regard to the situation in the United States, between 1966 and 1984 there was a twenty percent drop in the number of active diocesan priests, and it is predicted that between 1985 and the year 2005, there will be an additional twenty percent decline in the number of such priests available for active ministry. The most significant factor is recruitment: forty-six percent fewer priests were ordained between 1980 and 1984 than there were from 1966 to 1969. By the late 1990s the ordination rate will be sixty-nine percent lower than it was in the mid-sixties. Only six of every ten vacant positions are currently being filled by newly ordained priests.

The lower recruitment rate contributes to the rise in the average age of priests: forty-six percent of active diocesan clergy will be fifty-five years of age or over by the year 2005, and only twelve percent will be thirty-five or younger. In contrast to the World War II manpower shortage, there is no anticipation of a future influx of male workers, because this shortage is due to retirements, resignations, and a steady decrease in recruitments over the past twenty-five years.

Were it not for the continued growth in Catholic membership in the United States, the situation would be less critical. The ratio of laity to priests over the past fifteen years has increased from 1,102 Catholics per priest in 1975 to a ratio of 1,418 in 1985, and Schoenherr predicts that there will be 2,193 laypersons per priest by 2005. Since the priest shortage shows no sign of abating, and at the same time Catholic membership is steadily increasing, the recruitment of women to pastoring positions is not expected to be short-term.

The contemporary women's movement, which entered a phase of intense mobilization soon after the adjournment of the
Vatican Council, had important repercussions for Catholic women. It raised public consciousness regarding the second-class rank of women in the church. The gender caste system of the Catholic church, in which only men can attain the higher status of clergy while women—even those who join religious communities—are relegated to the ranks of the laity, was suddenly and starkly illuminated.

Have Catholics become more critical of the church's official position regarding the ordination of women? Greeley analyzed data from general social surveys at the National Opinion Research Center. Asked whether they thought "it would be a good thing if women were ordained as priests," American Catholics showed a fifteen percent increase in positive responses over an eight-year period. In 1974, twenty-nine percent agreed with the statement, but by 1982, forty-four percent agreed. At present, slightly over half of Catholic adults no longer view the priesthood as a male prerogative, a twenty-three percent increase from 1974 to 1985.

Some support for the ordination of women has come from professional groups within the church, such as the Catholic Biblical Association of America, which issued a report in 1979 concluding that the evidence in the New Testament, "while not decisive by itself, points toward the admission of women to priestly ministry."

Individual members of the clergy have spoken out at various times in favor of women's ordination. For example, as early as 1970 sociologist Joseph Fichter, S.J. presented this challenge:

What I am suggesting here is full equality of opportunity for women in the Catholic church. This means that women priests should be selected, appointed and promoted according to the same criteria employed for male priests. They should engage in both the parochial and special ministries of the church, receiving monsignorial honors if deserved, being appointed as chancery officials if competent, and reaching even the bishopric, cardinalate and papacy. Sex discrimination should go the way of ethnic and racial discrimination.

In the early 1980s a few Catholic bishops in the United States wrote statements published in their dioceses addressing the problem of sexism in the church, and encouraged a rethinking...
of the role of women. In 1990, the American bishops published the second draft of a pastoral letter as a response to women’s concerns. On the one hand the document condemned sexism as a sin, supported the theological preparation of women to preach the Gospel, recommended that “an incapacity to deal with women as equals should be considered a negative indication for fitness to ordination,” and credited the women’s movement for the part it played in helping nuns and laywomen to discover a new solidarity.

On the other hand, the document fell far short of the expectations of many Catholics. While admitting that there are “many women who can do what priests do,” it sidestepped the issue of women’s ordination by appealing to “unbroken tradition.” It only went so far as to recommend that the question of women being ordained as deacons “be submitted to thorough investigation.”

The final vote on the proposed pastoral letter, which was to have been taken at the November 1990 national bishops’ meeting, was postponed indefinitely on September 13, 1990. The explanatory statement by the committee making the decision cited as the principal reason “the need for more time and more consultation before the project reaches a conclusion.” Another reason for the delay was that the Vatican had “suggested that consultation with bishops’ conferences of other countries on this pastoral letter would be appropriate.” Finally, it was argued that responses from the second draft of the proposed letter were still being received, and that the additional time would “allow a more reflective consideration of these responses.”

The women’s movement was instrumental in other ways as well in regard to this movement of women into new roles in the church. Many American Catholic women experienced a heightening of their critical consciousness as they worked for the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment. These experiences helped some Catholic women to reflect on their countless hours of parish service and their exclusion from the most important functions in the ministry.

The use of gender-neutral language, an important agenda item of the contemporary women’s movement, has gradually penetrated the Catholic church in the United States. For example, an excerpt from a consensus statement resulting from a
symposium on Women and Church Law sponsored by the Canon Law Society of America in 1976 reads:

We ask that the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, in conjunction with other Episcopal Conferences, work to replace sexist language in liturgical texts. We ask that such language be replaced in Conference statements, in existing Church legislation, and carefully avoided in any future statements and legislation.32

Some language revision in scripture readings, in hymns and prayers, and even in the revised Code of Canon Law has been accomplished, though much still remains to be done. The documents of Vatican II, some provisions in the new Code of Canon Law, demographic changes, and the contemporary women's movement have expedited the movement of women into new roles in the Catholic church. These facilitating factors help to explain why there are a few Catholic women serving as pastors of priestless parishes in the United States.

PREVIOUS AND CURRENT RESEARCH

One of the few previous studies of Catholic women pastors is Peter Gilmour's dissertation on priestless parishes, limited to nine rural parishes in the midwest: five in the west north central and four in the east north central regions of the United States. All of his parishes were predominantly white, and all were headed by nuns.33 While he touches on some of the dilemmas experienced by the women administering these parishes, his book is predominantly descriptive of the context of the pastor's experience in each of these parishes. He focuses on this context in his interviews with the women pastors. Although there are a few statements from parishioners and priests in some of his chapters, it does not appear that he systematically interviewed parishioners and priests who were serving as sacramental ministers in each of the parishes.34

A national survey of administrators of priestless parishes in the United States that will be conducted under the auspices of the Institute for Pastoral Life is currently in the preparatory stage.35 Located in Kansas City, Missouri, the Institute for Pastoral Life is a national center serving home mission dioceses characterized by
vast geographic distances, sparse populations, and a poverty of resources. Established by a group of Catholic bishops in 1985, the institute focuses on the lay ministry needs of the parishes in these rural dioceses, and offers a direct training program of pastoral life coordinators (their title for laity heading priestless parishes) consisting of a three year cycle summer institute.

A perusal of the 1990 edition of the Official Catholic Directory revealed that there were 210 parishes in the United States administered by nonpriests. The largest portion of these parishes, sixty-one percent (129) were headed by nuns, twenty-two percent (47) were headed by deacons, nine percent (19) by laity, six percent (12) by religious brothers, and one percent (3) by pastoral teams. Keeping in mind that the data for each edition of the Directory are gathered during the previous year, and the number of parishes headed by nonpriests increased from the previous edition (1989) by twenty-five, we can assume that at the present time there are approximately three hundred parishes or two percent of a total of 19,069 parishes in the United States being administered by nonpriests. A recent edition of Corpus Reports cites a Vatican report that 157,000, or thirty-four percent of parishes worldwide, are without a priest; whereas in the United States ten percent of parishes are priestless.

A research project on women appointed to administer parishes outside the United States was conducted by Katherine Gilfeather in Chile. Her study, entitled “The Changing Role of Women in the Catholic Church in Chile,” was published in 1977. She reported that there were over eighty nuns acting as administrators of priestless parishes in many dioceses, doing tasks traditionally reserved for priests, and, as she said, “in general, taking the lion’s share of responsibility for the spiritual welfare of the inhabitants.” As we know from the section in the earlier part of this chapter, these women were serving as pastors in spite of the fact that the new church law had not as yet been promulgated.

In 1987 I conducted an exploratory study of a small number of Catholic women who were in church positions that had been previously monopolized by men: chancellors of dioceses, canon lawyers, and administrators of priestless parishes. The focus of that preliminary study, published in 1988, was on the creation of a new social reality for Catholic women; that is, on the causes
rather than the consequences of recruitment to these new roles. Nonetheless, the data from those in-depth interviews shed some light on the consequences of women's movement into these new roles. For example, I found that there were considerable limitations to the power and control exercised by Catholic women administrators.

The results of a national survey of American Catholic laity also shed some light on the acceptance of women as pastors. A majority (sixty-five percent) of the respondents said that Catholic laity (men and women) should have the right to be in charge of a parish when the priest is absent. A quarter (twenty-seven percent) said the laity should not have this right, and eight percent said they were not sure. There were no significant gender differences on this item. Thus, women who are placed in charge of priestless parishes can expect to find that about two-thirds of the parishioners approve of their appointment and about one-fourth disapprove.

What the survey could not tell us was how parishioners translate these attitudes into behavior as they interact with a lay administrator appointed to head their parish, particularly when the layperson is a woman. Left unanswered were such questions as the following: Do her parishioners give a woman leader the same quality and quantity of support they gave the previous pastors? What are the types of behavior which show that parishioners affirm or reject her position as parish leader? What are her perceptions regarding the constraints and resources experienced in her everyday life in this new position?

MY RESEARCH

During the month of May 1989, I wrote letters to twenty women throughout the United States who had been appointed by their bishops to administer priestless parishes—and who had been doing so for at least a year—asking them to participate in my study. Most of the names and addresses of the women included in this study were obtained from the 1988 Official Catholic Directory, others came from women pastors whom I had interviewed in an exploratory study, and a few names came from other people knowledgeable about this phenomenon.

In the letter I identified myself as a sociologist and a lifelong
Catholic who was embarking on a research project on women who had been appointed to pastoral leadership roles in parishes with no resident priest. I expressed the hope that the findings of my study would help to smooth the transition process for women who would be appointed to this role in the future.

My letter explained that I planned to visit twenty parishes throughout the country, where I would spend the weekend conducting interviews with the woman heading the parish, with the priest who provides sacramental ministry, and with two elected lay leaders of the parish (one male and one female). I also said that I planned to participate in all of the liturgies and other parish activities taking place that weekend.

When I phoned them a week later to schedule my proposed visit to their parishes, all twenty of the women said that they were willing to participate in the study. In spite of the fact that they were leading very busy lives, they were willing to contact the priest and parishioners and to arrange the time and place for my interviews prior to my arrival. When I asked them to recommend a hotel or motel nearby where I could make a reservation, most of them invited me to stay with them, either at the parish house or at their own homes. They also agreed to send me a copy of the history of the parish, where such a document existed, so that I could acquaint myself with the context of their situation before I arrived on the scene.

However, in making those initial phone calls, I discovered that two of the women had been recently terminated by their bishops, and a month later, I learned of a third termination. I substituted the next three names on my list for these three who were no longer living in their parishes; but I asked all three terminated women if they would agree to an interview, even though they would no longer be working in the same location. All three agreed, and I was able to conduct in-depth interviews with them as well.

One criterion for inclusion in the study was that these women appointed by the bishop as pastoral administrators had served in this capacity for at least one year. The total number of women who had been appointed to administer a parish before July 1, 1988, and whose names, addresses, and phone numbers were on my list, was eighty, so my sample represents one-fourth of the total population.
Initially I assumed that nuns would have an easier adjustment to the new role than laywomen, because parishioners would perceive them as having a higher religious status as exemplified by their vows, their title, and, in some cases, their dress. Although nuns are not members of the clergy, and they are, strictly speaking, laywomen, Catholics tend to place them in a separate category, “a level above” the laity. Even though they cannot be called “Father,” religious women do have the title “Sister,” which is not shared by their lay counterparts.

In order to compare the experiences of laywomen with that of nuns, I chose nine parishes headed by laywomen and eleven headed by nuns. To my knowledge, these nine laywomen were the only women who had served as a pastor for a year or more, and who were not members of religious communities. As mentioned earlier, sixty-one percent of nonpriest-headed parishes in the United States are led by female members of religious communities. However, this proportion will change radically in the near future because women’s religious communities, like the priesthood, are experiencing a steady decrease in numbers of applicants. Thus we can expect to see a continuing increase in the numbers of laywomen appointed to head parishes. Therefore, I overrepresented the number of laywomen in my sample, because I considered their involvement to be the wave of the future, given the increasing shortage of both priests and nuns.

Parishes headed by laywomen who were not nuns were geographically dispersed in four of the nine census regions in the United States. In order to include the eastern and southern part of the United States, I included parishes headed by nuns in two additional census regions. Although I traveled to twelve states in all, I will not reveal the specific states in order to safeguard the anonymity of the people I interviewed.

The following are the six census regions represented in my study and the number of parishes I visited in each: (1) Middle Atlantic (New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania), two parishes; (2) East North Central (Wisconsin, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Ohio), four parishes; (3) West North Central (Minnesota, Iowa, Missouri, North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas), three parishes; (4) South Atlantic (Delaware, Maryland, West Virginia, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, District of...
Columbia), three parishes; (5) West South Central (Arkansas, Oklahoma, Louisiana, Texas), three parishes; and (6) Pacific (Washington, Oregon, California, Alaska, Hawaii), five parishes. In all, then, I traveled to twenty parishes representing fourteen dioceses and located in twelve states.

How "representative" was my sample? I combined the census regions into four categories and compared my sample to the total number of parishes headed by nonpriests in the United States (210) as reported in the 1990 Official Catholic Directory. What I found was that in three of the regions my parishes were very similar: The largest cluster of nonpriest-headed parishes nationally is in the Midwest, forty percent (84), compared to thirty-five percent (7) of my parishes. The next largest cluster is in the South, thirty-two percent (68), compared to thirty percent (6) of my parishes. Another large cluster is in the West, twenty-six percent (55), compared to twenty-five percent (5) of my parishes. The region where I purposely oversampled, because I was aware that very few parishes were headed by nonpriests, was in the Northeast. Nationally only two percent (4) of the parishes in the Northeast are headed by nonpriests, compared to ten percent (2) of my parishes.

Another key assumption was that the climate of opinion created by supportive bishops would ease the transition into the new role for all women pastors. Thus I wanted to compare the experiences of women who were administering parishes located in dioceses headed by supportive bishops with those whose bishops were either neutral or nonsupportive. Bishops who engaged in activities such as the following were considered supportive: writing a public statement in support of women’s greater participation in the church; visiting the parish prior to the appointment to explain to the parishioners the reasons for her appointment; making a public announcement of the appointment in the diocesan newspaper; participating in her formal installation ceremony in the parish; and including her in all the official mailings sent to other (male) pastors. Based on these criteria, half of the parishes in my sample are located in dioceses with supportive bishops.

I was also interested in rural-urban differences. My assumption was that Catholics living in large cities where there are many churches could simply attend Mass at another church if
they did not approve of a woman as pastor. Likewise, Catholics living in smaller communities would have fewer alternatives for Sunday worship services, and would be more inclined to cooperate in order to keep their parish open. I wanted to compare the experiences of women whose parishes were located in large cities with those located in smaller communities. However, I soon found that the great majority of parishes headed by women were located in small rural communities, so only two large city parishes could be included.

When I visited these parishes between June and December 1989, I stayed for the weekend, usually three days and two nights, and in most cases I was their guest in the rectory or parish house. I conducted taped interviews not only with the woman in charge of the parish, but also with the priest who came to celebrate Mass and administer the sacraments (often called the sacramental minister), and two parishioners, one male and one female, who were members of the parish council.\(^{48}\) I describe these interviews as in-depth because I spent approximately two hours interviewing each pastor, and one hour each with the priest and two parishioners. The interviews were also semistructured because, although there were specific open-ended questions asked, I also probed wherever feasible, and gave the interviewee many opportunities for input that was not included in the interview schedule.\(^{49}\)

In addition to four interviews at each parish, I also conducted taped interviews with the three women who had been terminated as pastors shortly after they had agreed to participate in the study. The total number of in-depth interviews, therefore, was eighty-three.

While visiting at the parishes I would often hold informal interviews with parishioners, that I recorded in my field notes. I also gathered data by observing the interaction between the woman who was pastoring the parish and her central role partners (priest and parishioners) at the various parish functions occurring over the weekend, such as the worship services where she and/or the priest are the presiders, and other church activities, like baptisms, weddings, visits to the sick, coffee and donut gatherings after Mass, church dinners, and meetings of the parish council. Since in most cases I was a guest in their homes, and
often traveled with the women pastors to church functions, I was able to observe them in their daily lives and to discuss a variety of topics with them.

With the cooperation of the woman pastor, I was also able to collect some documentary data such as parish histories, church bulletins, diocesan guidelines regarding lay pastors, contracts, letters of appointment, and relevant local newspaper articles. The data for this book, then, include the tape-recorded interviews, the informal conversations and observations that I recorded in a notebook during my visit to the parish, and documents.

The Lilly Endowment grant enabled me to hire a professional person for the next stage of the research project, the transcription of the interview tapes that were stored on disks as well as printed out. The database also included participant observation field notes and documentary material that were likewise stored on disks. After completing the coding of the data, I was aided in the data-retrieval stage by a graduate student research assistant, provided for by the National Science Foundation grant. Data were retrieved and analyzed by using a variant of Word Perfect’s search and retrieve functions. When this was completed I was then able to begin the final write-up stage of the project.

The title of this book is *They Call Her Pastor*. Although the title “pastor” is, strictly speaking, reserved for priest-pastors, I soon found that not only were these women doing the work of priest-pastors, but they were often referred to as the pastor. For instance, at least three of their bishops introduced them as pastor in public, and the mail they received from the diocesan administration offices often addressed them as pastor. Most of the parishioners I interviewed said they considered their woman administrator to be their pastor, and referred to her as pastor when speaking of her to people outside the parish.

Several of the priests who were serving as sacramental ministers for the parish also called them pastor. One of the priests put it this way,

The sense that I got right away is that she is in many ways the pastor of the parish. I remember telling other people this. If there is a problem, they always go to a pastor. So I guess I knew right away that she really was the leader of the parish.