

Article

Gender and Race in Ministry Leadership: Experiences of Black Clergywomen

Kimberly Nelms Smarr, PsyD¹*, Rachele Disbennett-Lee, PhD² and Amy Cooper Hakim, Ph.D.³

¹ Inspiring Exemplary Leadership; dr.kns_organizationalleadership@yahoo.com

² The Raad Group; rachele@coachlee.com

³ The Cooper Strategic Group; amy@cooperstrategicgroup.com

* Correspondence: dr.kns_organizationalleadership@yahoo.com; Tel.: 1-281-201-7888 (voice) 1-281-310-1055 (voice)

Abstract: Despite the increase of seminary training, Black clergywomen continuously undergo subjugation, degradation, and humiliation in ministry leadership due to gender and race bias (Leslie, 2013) by clergymen. This article reports the findings of a qualitative study that examined the experiences of Black clergywomen regarding obstacles in ministry leadership and how these clergywomen ascribed meaning to their experiences. The two primary research questions were, "What are the experiences of Black clergywomen regarding obstacles in ministry leadership?" and "How do Black clergywomen attribute meaning to their experiences regarding obstacles in ministry leadership?" The results of the study indicated that bias of gender and inequality exists among clergymen; however, the Black clergywomen learned to embrace the experiences and learned from them. The conclusion of this article includes a discussion regarding practical implications of the education of clergy; and the re-evaluation of the perception of Black clergywomen and their experiences. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the experiences of Black clergywomen pertaining to challenges in clergy leadership and to explore how Black clergywomen attributed meaning to their experiences regarding challenges in ministry leadership.

Keywords: Leadership, Women, Women Clergy, Black, Religion and Gender.

1. Introduction

Gender and race of clergywomen have been a topic in ministry for many years. Concerns with gender inequality have been prevalent, despite the increase of clergywomen over the past 30 years (Thomas, 2013). In 2002, clergywomen represented 14.1% (55,413) of the estimated 393,000 United States clergy (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2002). In 2014, clergywomen represented 18.3% (79,239) of the estimated 433,000 United States clergy (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014) signifying a significant upsurge in the last 12 years. Of the total 433,000 U.S. clergywomen (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014), Asian women comprised 6.9% (29,877), Hispanic or Latino women equaled 7.5% (32,475), and African American or Black1 women represented 8.3% (35,939).

Education

Truman (2011) asserted the 8.3% increase in clergy leadership of Black clergywomen is attributed to the opportunities of theological education that was formerly unattainable for them. Thomas (2013) concluded that it is the remarkable level of clergy education for Black clergywomen creating the significant increase of African American clergywomen.

Gender and Race

Clergy is among the occupations that continue to make use of gender inequality in ecclesiastical practice. Thomas (2013) upheld that clergywomen have added to the

population of religious leadership over the past 30 years; yet, clergywomen of all races have been deprived of unbiased leadership ranking. The attitude among clergymen has often concentrated around clergywomen as subordinate to men (Banks, 2012).

Women in clergy authority continue to be restricted by religious rules and malecontrolled policies that support men advancing in clerical leadership. Many church denominations are insistent in negating women equality in pastoring and preaching in ministry leadership. The prejudice against clergywomen in church leadership and the criticism against women in clergy leadership have been recorded by secular researchers and religious scholars from the perspectives of theology, sociology, psychology, political, and economic (Hamman, 2010).

However many women of the clergy view their gender as an advantage. For many clergywomen, they see their identities as women providing them with the opportunity to reach a wider spectrum of believers (Chen, 2000). Although clergywomen are aware of the challenges that their gender may create, it can also be viewed as allowing them to have a unique influence not available to their male counterparts. "Generally speaking, women have been allowed to be relatively in touch with their emotions. Men are required to be more stolid and restrained" (Chen, 2000, p. 23).

Ministry Leadership

Although clergywomen may view their gender as providing them with unique advantages, clergymen and/or the congregation do not always share that view. Religious denominations of Caucasian and Black congregations have debated against the ordination of women. Banbury (2014) mentioned that common contentions that have opposed the ordination of women have included women must be silent, women are prohibited by scripture, and women must remain subjected to men.

Conflicts of societal impact of clergywomen could result in misogyny in positions and organizations where clergywomen exist (Petzinger, 2009). In her book entitled *Feminization of the Clergy in America*, Paula Nesbitt (1997) asserted the misogyny against clergywomen. Nesbitt (1997) stated, "Of the challenges facing women clergy, one of the most frustrating has been the growing backlash against their presence in many religious organizations, as much through passive occupational restructuring as through overt resistance" (p. 107). Lehmann (2002) in his *Pulpit and Pew* study, "Women's Path into Ministry: Six Major Studies," alluded to Nesbitt's assertions on prejudice against clergywomen and concluded that:

The general pattern seems to involve women clergy increasing in number to some significant mass, the male leaders becoming threatened by the appearance of a challenge to their exclusive right to leadership positions, and then a stiffening of opposition to women to keep them in subordinate roles (p. 33).

The reality is that Black women are the backbone of the church. They are the ones who volunteer, tithe steadily, chair committees, take care of the day-to-day functions of the church, and make up between 70 and 90 percent of the congregations. Yet, when it comes to power and decision-making, they are most often relegated to auxiliary roles: their voices are heard in an advisory capacity, if they are heard at all. Regardless of the significant increase of clergywomen into ministerial leadership, clergymen relent to the prejudice conclusion of the inferiority of clergywomen (Frame & Shehan, 2005; Newkirk & Cooper,

2013).

While the views of clergywomen have been a theme of attention in society for many years, there is a gap in consideration of clergy experiences, specifically of the experiences of African American clergywomen. This qualitative study arose out of the need to identify the experiences and views of African American clergywomen who experience obstacles in their ministry leadership (Cummings & Latta, 2010; Howell-Baker, 2005; Leslie, 2013). When the views of how African American clergywomen experience obstacles are neglected, the credibility of female spiritual guidance (Adams, 2007) and the loyalty of church members (Miles & Proeschold-Bell, 2012) are negatively impacted. Without the study into their experiences, clergywomen remain subjected to actual prejudiced behavior, exposed to opposition of congregants (Miles & Proeschold-Bell, 2012), and neglected of being heard (Newkirk & Cooper, 2013).

Prejudice of Clergymen

The debate among clergymen has often focused around clergywomen as weak leaders in church ministry (Frame & Shehan, 2005). Due to prejudice of clergymen, clergywomen continue to face restrictions of religious responsibilities (Alexander, 2012); lack of assistance, training, and mentoring in ministry leadership (Leslie, 2013); and the limitation of leadership positions such as senior pastors, elders and ministers (Newkirk & Cooper, 2013).

For centuries, leadership in the church has been exclusively male. Many did not question the status quo, however in recent decades women are beginning to challenge this and have begun to create change. According to Gonzalez (1998) more women are serving as pastors and clergy leaders in Protestant churches despite job discrimination, disparities in pay between male and female clergy, and resistance from congregations.

Black clergywomen remain deficient in the possibilities to lead congregations, limited in the opportunities to be selected for employment, and restricted from advancement in ministry leadership. This “stained glass ceiling” confronted by Black clergywomen inhibits them from upward mobility in ministry due to gender (Rois, Rixon & Faseruk, 2013) and race (Leslie, 2013). Gender and race are methods of subjugation, which has the dominance to control, and that dominance is ruled by clergymen. This study focused on gender and race of Black clergywomen of multi-denominational Protestant churches from Houston, Texas who faced obstacles in ministry leadership. The study examined:

1. What are the lived experiences of Black clergywomen regarding obstacles in ministry leadership?
2. How do Black clergywomen ascribe meaning to their lived- experiences regarding obstacles in ministry leadership?
3. What are the perceptions of Black clergywomen regarding what needs to happen in clergy hierarchy in order to remove obstacles in ministry leadership so they can fully engage as a clergywoman?

2. Results

Nine participants met the criteria of being Black clergywomen of multi-denominational Protestant churches in Houston, Texas ranging from 8 years to 66 years in ministry leadership and representing clergy leadership in multi-denominations to include Apostolic, Baptist, Church of God in Christ (COGIC), and Holiness Protestant churches. These Black

clergywomen were of many clergy roles including Apostles, Community leaders, Deaconess, Evangelist, Lay Pastor, Minister, Pastor, and Senior Pastor.

The data analysis disclosed three categories of nodes representing the frequency of themes and phrases (See Appendix B). Also, the analysis of data uncovered three categories of themes and sub-categories. The three themes are: (a) The Experiences Regarding Obstacles in Ministry Leadership, (b) The Meaning Attributed to the Experiences, and (c) The Recommendations for the Removal of Obstacles in Ministry Leadership (See Appendix C).

2.1. Theme One: The Experiences Regarding Obstacles in Ministry Leadership

In describing the authentic experiences of these women as clergy leaders, eight obstacles developed: abuse of power, attitudes of the congregation, discrimination, family dynamics, jealousy, lack of financial support, limitations based on traditional beliefs, and self-worth (see Appendix C). One of the nine particular study participants expressed that she did not encounter any obstacles as a Black clergywoman. Eight of the nine clergywomen experienced various forms of maltreatment, but they all expressed similar views of being resisted and rejected in some way. The study participants viewed their experiences regarding obstacles in ministry leadership was due to opposition and disapproval by congregational leaders.

The researchers assumed the interpretation of findings was observed in several ways to include gender and inequality bias of Black clergywomen in ministry leadership. The key findings regarding the obstacle of gender and inequality bias converged with existing literature; and attributed the bias of clergymen to upholding views and perpetuating behaviors on such prejudices.

Participant Six communicated her experiences regarding the obstacle of being a single clergywoman. She stated:

Because I am a gender of a female, I am in a category of being a wife not to mention that I am not married so that opens up a whole 'nother can of worms of being a single female preaching the gospel

Participant Seven communicated her experience regarding the obstacles of jealousy and competition. She expressed that clergy leadership:

gave a black male the opportunity to be over something to rule. This was a boost to their self-esteem. And so basically, I became an invader. When I talk about "I", I'm talking about the female minister became an invader. We became disrupters to something they had coined or carved out for themselves. It gave them a sense of wellbeing. It gave them a sense of authority. It gave them a sense of power...The issue was "this is my area of domain so you don't have any right to cross this threshold because this is all we have. We've been in control of everything."

Participant Two shared her experience regarding the obstacle of discrimination. She stated, "As female pastor, just being in that leadership role, a lot of people are not open to women pastoring based on religion. People are still discriminating against it."

2.2. Theme Two: The Meaning Attributed to the Experiences

In expressing the genuine experiences of these clergywomen in ministry leadership, there are

26 advantages of the meaning attributed to the experiences regarding obstacles in clergy ministry: best thing that ever happened, embrace and expect obstacles, empower others, expand opportunities, focused on the Call, forgiveness, freedom, God opens doors, grateful, growth, humble, knowledge of society, rationalization, Spirit of God, kind, listen, loving, made me better, obedience and acceptance to the call, patience, positive surroundings, reassurance, self-worth increase, sensitivity, tenacity, trust God, and understanding (see Appendix C).

The participants perceived they were being favored by God and felt grateful and humbled at how God had chosen them for ministry leadership. Each clergywoman encountered several types of advantages; but all explained similar perceptions of being called by God in some way. The findings of this research supported the assumption of the primary researcher that Black clergywomen attributed meanings of advantages to their experiences regarding obstacles in ministry leadership.

When asked, "In your perception, how have your experiences regarding obstacles in ministry influenced your self-worth?" Participant Nine answered this question responding:

So the obstacles that I had gone through...the things that tried to stop me...tried to hinder my progress or to hinder me...I had to do this. And in doing this I would see the reward of the obstacle that came my way because it made me better and not bitter. It showed the strength of God. There was tenacity [and] resilience that with God I could always bounce back. The obstacles brought the best out of me.

The participants continued to answer the question, "What more would you tell me about what those experiences mean to you?" Participant Nine stated, "So now I look forward to challenges because it lets me know that I can do this with God on my side." Participant Two stated, "I'm more confident. I understand who I am and what I've been called to do. Helping people find their God given assignment has been the best thing that has happened to me."

Twenty disadvantages of the meaning attributed to the experiences regarding obstacles in clergy ministry were revealed: depression, devastation, felt sinful, hurt and disdain, impure thoughts, isolation, made a mistake, missed God, obscurity, out of order, questioned God, revenge, resistance, sadness and sorrow, set back, self-doubt and self-worth decrease, self-pity, submission to traditional beliefs, unhappy, and upset. Appendix B details the meanings of advantages and disadvantages attributed to the experiences.

The Black clergywomen of this study perceived they were being resisted and felt oppressed at how clergymen were rejecting women in ministry leadership. These findings are congruent with other scholars identifying how Black clergywomen ascribed meanings of disadvantages to their experiences regarding obstacles in ministry leadership (Leslie, 2013; Lustgarten; 2007; Thro, 2014).

Participant Four shared that the meaning attributed to her experiences involved several disadvantages. She stated, "I felt spirit of oppression, depression, doubt, no drive, and questioned if I was out of order. When I should have been happy I couldn't pinpoint what the problem was in my life." Participant Six expressed, "Self-denial kept me in a place of obscurity, sadness, almost to a depressed place because what was in me I could not express."

2.3. The Recommendations for the Removal of Obstacles in Ministry Leadership

In expressing the actual advices of these Black clergywomen in ministry leadership, there are nine recommendations that evolved: support of male leadership, clergywomen mentors, a positive image towards women in ministry, educational classes, prayer, respect the call,

speak up, understand God's call, and unity (see Appendix C). The study participants described their recommendations for the removal of obstacles consisting of allowing ministry opportunities and educating clergy. The important findings diverged from existing literature; and upheld the examination of the primary researcher. When asked, "In your perception, what needs to happen in clergy hierarchy in order to remove obstacles in ministry leadership so you can fully engage as a clergywoman?"

Participant Five responded:

Education. I think the very first part is the education to the clergy is that God has assigned a place for women in ministry. I think a lot of the reasons that our clergy, men especially, are intimidated by women coming into the profession of clergy is because of the lack of knowledge of knowing that women have been assigned this position since the Bible days.

The results of this research study offer valuable information about the experiences of Black clergywomen regarding obstacles in ministry leadership and the meaning they attribute to these experiences.

3. Discussion

In 2014, the amount of clergywomen totaled 80,538 of the estimated 433,000 United States clergy – representing 18.6% of total U.S. clergy (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014). Black or African American women represented 8.3% (35,939) of total 433,000 U.S. clergywomen (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014). Black clergywomen have endured the prejudice of clergymen due to gender and race (Leslie, 2013), which has contributed to the lack of opportunities for Black clergywomen in ministry leadership and ministry advancement. The themes revealed in this study uphold this premise.

These results have implications for the education and involvement of clergy. Educating clergy could enhance understanding of clergywomen's experiences, establish mentorship programs, and develop training courses. Also, the results have implications for clergy leaders of how to re-evaluate their perception pertaining to the experiences of Black clergywomen. Reconsidering their specific behaviors and actions pertaining to the experiences of Black clergywomen may offer new perceptions of these clergywomen for developing impartiality in ministry leadership. As stated by participant Three, "*How much more could we accomplish if we all come together in oneness...with impartiality.*" The implications of the findings increase in significance as the expansion of clergywomen in ministry leadership increases.

The fundamental assumption of the qualitative study was that clergymen, congregants, and society possessed prejudice regarding gender and inequality of clergywomen with predominance of prejudice for Black clergywomen. Despite their increase in education, Black clergywomen remain deficient in the possibilities to lead congregations as pastors limited in the opportunities for clergy employment, and restricted from advancement in ministry leadership.

Although measures were taken to safeguard authenticity, this study presents limitations. A foundational limitation of the qualitative study was that the primary researcher is a Black clergywoman and had to ensure to incorporate Moustakas' (1994b) concept of minimizing researcher bias by utilizing Epoche (the bracketing of personal experiences, presumptions and belief). An essential limitation was that five Black clergywomen of the

study were personally selected; however, this study was conducted utilizing snowball sampling, which relied on participants who were experienced with ministry leadership and were knowledgeable of potential research participants who were interested in participating in the study.

Additional limitations discovered during the study affected transferability: (1) the findings cannot be applied beyond this case. The researcher can only offer sufficient data in order for the reader to decide the relevancy of the findings to other situations; (2) the sample did not include clergywomen of other geographic locations. The locality in which the study was performed was limited to Houston, Texas. The findings of another geographical area may have revealed the experiences of clergywomen unlike those expressed by clergywomen of Houston, Texas; (3) the sample did not involve clergywomen of other ethnicities, only Black clergywomen, which may not apply to clergywomen of other ethnicities and diverse cultures; and (4) data saturation was achieved after the primary researcher interviewed nine participants. A larger sample size may have shown experiences unlike those expressed by the nine Black clergywomen. Delimitations included the specific population, sample size, location, and period of time that participants were requested to participate.

The primary researcher is as an African American clergywoman who is affiliated with the same denominational backgrounds as seven of the participants and holds the same clergy roles in ministry leadership as eight of the participants. As such, there was awareness of the faiths, beliefs and experiences of the participants regarding obstacles in ministry leadership, which could be considered as a possible bias of this qualitative study. However, within this study, the perceptions and behaviors of clergy provided analysis of data that may not have been understood by non-Protestant Christian believers or other clergywomen of other ethnicities.

The implications of this research could enlighten clergy and congregations of the need to reassess their understanding of how they receive, accept and support Black clergywomen and their obstacles in ministry leadership. Reexamining their understanding of the experiences of Black clergywomen may offer knowledge for current theories of qualitative phenomenology for researching experiences, add to the development of future studies on the experiences of Black clergywomen, and contribute to improving unity among Black clergywomen, clergy and congregations. The results of the research study might clarify current and future theories that may assist other specialists expand their research by addressing additional gender and inequality bias not addressed in this research study; and by asking unique research questions and interview questions not asked in this study.

Another identified implication was the meanings the participants attributed to their experiences regarding obstacles in ministry leadership, which indicated that there needs to be clergy training and leadership workshops in ministry to address the issues of accepting Black clergywomen in ministry leadership. Addressing these needs could contribute to present or future theories for understanding the meaning of the experiences.

4. Methods

Prior to conducting this qualitative study, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the University of the Rockies granted approval for the proposal, which included the informed consent process, how informed consent was acquired, and how confidentiality was

addressed. The data collection involved 30-60 minutes, face-to-face, in-depth, semistructured interviews, observational journals, and telephone audiotaped interviews to ask the nine Black clergywomen a sequence of predetermined, 12 semi-structured, open-ended questions. Prior to the main study, a pilot of three Black clergywomen was incorporated in order to uncover issues, make necessary corrections to enhance the research procedures, and examine the potential of the success of the study. The introduction to the interview and the initial questions were developed in order to inspire total confidence, honesty and participation in the interview (See Appendix A), which allowed for credibility and dependability of data.

Interviews were conducted by the primary researcher suggesting that the participants pray prior to beginning the interview and before answering questions in order to convey trustworthiness of the answers. Moustakas (1994a) suggested that it is customary routine to initiate the “interview with a social conversation or a short meditative activity that is aimed at creating a relaxed and trusting atmosphere” (p. 114). Seven audio taped-recorded interviews were conducted in the research participant’s personal church office while two telephone audio tape-recorded interviews were conducted in a relaxed setting chosen by the participant, transcribed verbatim, coded into themes, analyzed, and compared in order to answer the research questions effectively.

Non-probability, snowball sampling method was used in order to contact one or more participants of the population and request referrals of potential participants of the same population (Chromy, 2008; Morgan, 2008). These additional participants were asked to refer other potential participants of the same population to create a multiplicity of data subjects (Chromy, 2008). Five Black clergywomen who were experienced with ministry leadership, knowledgeable of potential research participants, and willing to refer additional contacts of Black clergywomen were directly contacted by the primary researcher who is an African American clergywoman, which created accessibility to the population in order to request participation.

Coding was used to protect the privacy of each participant. Each participant’s name was coded with a 2-letter identification representing the initial of the first name and the initial of the last name. Each clergywoman’s position was identified with a 2-letter identification representing the role of the clergywoman in ministry leadership and each Protestant church of the participant was coded with a 2-letter identification representing the denomination of the church. Several researchers reviewed the original transcribed summaries, participated in the process of analysis, and confirmed the themes.

5. Conclusions

Conducting research that examines gender and race in ministry leadership will afford all women of clergy to share their perceptions of the experiences in leading their congregation and the meaning of those experiences. The experiences could contribute to the development of future studies on the experiences of clergywomen. Consequently, the experiences of women leadership may add value to future experiences of women of clergy.

Note

1. The term *African American* and *Black* denotes those who have African ancestors. The terms will be used inversely throughout this article.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, Dr. Kimberly Nelms Smarr, PsyD; Data curation, Dr. Kimberly Nelms Smarr, PsyD and Dr. Rachelle Disbennett-Lee, PhD; Formal analysis, Dr. Kimberly Nelms Smarr, PsyD and Dr. Rachelle Disbennett-Lee, PhD; Investigation, Dr. Kimberly Nelms Smarr, PsyD; Methodology, Dr. Kimberly Nelms Smarr, PsyD; Project administration, Dr. Kimberly Nelms Smarr, PsyD; Resources, Dr.

Kimberly Nelms Smarr, PsyD, Dr. Rachelle Disbennett-Lee, PhD and Dr. Amy Cooper Hakim, PhD; Software, Dr. Rachelle Disbennett-Lee, PhD; Supervision, Dr. Kimberly Nelms Smarr, PsyD; Validation, Dr. Amy Cooper Hakim, PhD; Visualization, Dr. Kimberly Nelms Smarr, PsyD, Dr. Rachelle Disbennett-Lee, PhD and Dr. Amy Cooper Hakim, PhD; Writing – original draft, Dr. Kimberly Nelms Smarr, PsyD; Writing – review & editing, Dr. Kimberly Nelms Smarr, PsyD, Dr. Rachelle Disbennett-Lee, PhD and Dr. Amy Cooper Hakim, PhD.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Appendix A

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Opening Questions

1. What are the initials of your first and last name?
2. What is your role of clergy in ministry leadership?
3. What type of denominational Protestant church is your ministry?
4. How long have you been in ministry leadership?

Central Questions

5. What obstacles have you experienced in ministry leadership?
6. What has been your experience regarding the obstacles in ministry leadership?
7. How do you attribute meaning to your experiences regarding obstacles in ministry leadership?
8. How would you describe your ministry style (soft-spoken, calm, demonstrative, assertive...)?
9. In your perception, how have your experiences regarding obstacles in ministry influenced your ministry style?
10. In your perception, how have your experiences regarding obstacles in ministry influenced your self-worth?

Closing Questions

11. In your perception, what needs to happen in clergy hierarchy in order to remove obstacles in ministry leadership so you can fully engage as a clergywoman?
12. What more can you tell me about your experiences regarding obstacles in ministry leadership and how you attribute meaning to your experiences?

Appendix B

NODES OF FREQUENCY OF THEMES

Nodes of Frequency of Themes

Themes **# of Participants with Common Themes and Phrases**

Themes and Phrases of the Experiences Regarding Obstacles in Ministry Leadership

Emotional	1
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Physical	2
Sexual	1
Verbal	1
Criticism	2
Rejection	2
Resistance	1
Education	1
Gender	5
Race	1
Non Supportive Parent	2
Non Supportive Spouse	2
Single Clergywoman	2
Competition by Clergymen	4
Competition by Clergywomen	2
Competition by Wives of Clergymen	2
Man is the Leader and Overseer	4
Man's Society	2
Miss-use of Clergywomen	7
Not Allowed in Pulpit	4
Not Supposed to Preach	3
Positions in Church	4
Rejection of Clergywomen	6
Religious Strongholds	3
Sacraments in Church	2
Stay in Your Place	2
Superficial Understanding	1
Suppression of Clergywomen	4
Woman is Silent in the Church	1
Woman is Submissive	4
Woman is Subtle	1
Acceptable position	1
Never affected by role	1
Permitted to Perform Sacrament	1
Submission	1
Missed God	4
Self-Denial	2
Unsure of Self	3

Themes and Phrases of the Meaning to The Experiences Regarding Obstacles

Best Thing	6
Embrace and Expect Obstacles	2
Empower Others	5
Expanded Opportunities	2

Focused	1
Forgiveness	1
Freedom	1
God Opens Doors	3
Grateful	3
Growth	1
Humble	1
Knowledge of Society	3
Rationalization	2
Spirit of God	3
Kind	1
Listen	1
Loving	1
Made me Better	4
Obedience and Acceptance to the Call	3
Patience	1
Positive Surroundings	2
Reassurance	5
Self-Worth Increase	6
Sensitivity	1
Tenacity	4
Trust God	1
Understanding	2
Depression	2
Devastation	2
Felt Sinful	1
Hurt and Disdain	5
Impure Thoughts	1
Isolation	1
Made a Mistake	3
Missed God	3
Obscurity	1
Out of Order	2
Questioned God	3
Revenge	1
Resistance	2
Sadness and Sorrow	2
Set Back	1
Self-Doubt and Self-Worth Decrease	3
Self-Pity	1

Submission to Traditional Beliefs	2
Unhappy	1
Upset	1

Themes and Phrases of the Removal of Obstacles in Ministry Leadership

Allow Ministry Opportunities	3
Husband – Wife Ministry Teams	1
Male Support in the Home	1
Clergywomen Mentors	3
Books	1
Television	1
Workshops	3
Educate Clergy	2
Educate Congregation	4
Use Your Gifts and Talents	2

Appendix C

THEMES

Themes

Categories of Themes of the Experiences Regarding Obstacles in Ministry Leadership
1. Abuse of Power
2. Attitudes of the Congregation
3. Discrimination
4. Family Dynamics

5. Jealousy
6. Lack of Financial Support
7. Limitations Based on Traditional Beliefs
8. Self-Worth
Categories of Themes of the Meaning Attributed to the Experiences
9. Advantages of Experiences
10. Disadvantages of Experiences
Categories of Themes of the Recommendations for the Removal of Obstacles in Ministry Leadership
11. Support of Male Leadership
12. Clergywomen Mentors
13. Creating a Positive Image Towards Women in Ministry
14. Educational Classes
15. Prayer
16. Respect the Call
17. Speak Up
18. Understand God's Call
19. Unity

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