

“YOU CAN’T, ’CAUSE YOU’RE A GIRL”: ATLANTIC BAPTIST  
WOMEN NAVIGATING CALL, ORDINATION, AND OPPOSITION,  
1976–1987

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Christian churches in North America experienced significant changes in the twentieth century, including shifting views on the roles of women in ministry. With the rise of the second wave of feminism and the re-examination of biblical passages about women,<sup>1</sup> by the 1960s and 1970s many denominations began to consider allowing women to serve as ministers. Women’s ordination occurred first, but not exclusively, in more liberal denominations. As Edith Blumhofer noted, the topic of women’s ordination began to arise more widely in evangelical contexts in the late twentieth century.<sup>2</sup> This included Baptists. While multiple scholars have studied women’s ordination within the Southern Baptist context,<sup>3</sup> few have researched Canadian Baptist women’s ordination.<sup>4</sup>

1. See Sangster, *Demanding Equality*; Knoll and Bolin, *She Preached Word*, 5; Scanzoni and Hardesty, *All We’re Meant to Be*.

2. Blumhofer, “Confused Legacy,” 60. See also Chaves, *Ordaining Women*.

3. See, for example, Campbell-Reed, “Changing Hands”; Durso, “Journey to Ordination”; Blevins, “Diverse Baptist Attitudes”; Leonard, “Baptists and Ordination of Women.”

4. Among Canadian Baptists, ordination serves as an affirmation of an individual’s call to, training for, and suitability for ministry and is considered the necessary credentialing for ministers. For a study of ordained women within multiple Canadian denominations, see Steeves, “Lived Experiences.” For scholarship about Canadian Christian women, see Bowler, ed., *Canadian Baptist Women*; Muir and Whiteley, eds., *Changing Roles of Women*. This article will also incorporate insights from studies of ordained women across multiple denominations in North America. These include Bailey, “Strength for Journey”; Boberg, “Call Experiences”; Carroll et al., *Women of Cloth*; Zikmund et

This paper seeks to fill that gap in scholarship by examining the ministries of women ordained by the United Baptist Convention of the Atlantic Provinces (UBCAP) between 1976 and 1987.<sup>5</sup> Among this group, Josephine Kinley was the first woman ordained in 1954.<sup>6</sup> Her ordination was a harbinger of future events but was an outlier at the time.<sup>7</sup> The next two ordinations of women did not take place until 1964 and 1970. Of these three women, two are now deceased, and the third has dementia. Ten women (of whom eight are still living) were ordained by Atlantic Baptist churches in the years that followed, between 1976 and 1987, when the denomination voted to affirm women's ordination.<sup>8</sup> That ten women were ordained during these years demonstrates the increased interest among women in ministering and, among the churches and denomination, in recognizing that ministry formally. To better understand this history, along with my research assistant, I conducted oral history interviews of the eight living women who were ordained by churches within the UBCAP between 1976 and 1987.<sup>9</sup> While such a methodology is necessarily subjective, interviewees' words still provide a first-hand account of their experiences as they recall them. This paper analyzes these oral history interviews.<sup>10</sup> It argues that these women navigated challenges in their calling, education, ordination, denomination, and ministry while quietly persevering in their pursuit of the vocation to which they believed they had been called.

al., *Clergy Women*. While some of these studies are dated, they focus on women serving in ministry during the period this paper covers.

5. The UBCAP is today known as Canadian Baptists of Atlantic Canada.

6. For research into earlier women ministers in Atlantic Canada, see Bell, "Allowed Irregularities"; Eaton, "Issue of Female Ordination."

7. The same was true in other denominations, according to Mark Chaves (see Chaves, *Ordaining Women*, 12).

8. See Maxwell, "'Proceed with Care.'"

9. I am grateful to my research assistant Samantha Diotte, along with my teaching assistant Tracey Wooden, for their hard work on these interviews.

10. I am writing a separate paper on my interviewees' experiences of family and relationships, to be published in *Baptists and Gender* by Mercer University Press.

*Call Experiences*

As leaders in an evangelical tradition, Baptist ministers are expected to have experienced a sense of divine calling to their vocation. This call experience can be especially beneficial for women because recalling it can help them persist through difficult circumstances, as Judith Bledsoe Bailey describes.<sup>11</sup> Interviewee Elizabeth Legassie demonstrated this benefit from her own experience. Despite challenges in her seminary education, Legassie stated, “I knew I was where I was supposed to be and what I was supposed to be doing, so, you know, you get frustrated, but you keep going.”<sup>12</sup> Her sense of calling allowed her to persist through challenging circumstances. The same was true of many other women in my study.

Most of the women I interviewed felt a desire to serve God from a young age, just as Kathleen Steeves observes in her research.<sup>13</sup> Chris MacDormand avowed, “I’ve always felt a call to ministry,” expressing that, when she was as young as six years old, she knew she would not be married or have children but would instead dedicate her life to serving God.<sup>14</sup> In her case, singleness accompanied her vocational call. Joyce Hancock recounted, “I felt the call at a really young age.” Miriam Uhrstrom was similarly attending a Baptist camp as a nine-year-old when she told her counselor that she wanted to be a minister. According to Uhrstrom, “She said, ‘You can’t, ’cause you’re a girl.’”<sup>15</sup> Her counselor’s words reflected typical Atlantic Baptist views at the time. Yet Uhrstrom persevered in her calling.

Uhrstrom was not the only woman to feel a sense of call while attending a Christian camp or conference. Among others, Kathy Neily struggled to reconcile her gender with her calling

11. Bailey, “‘Strength for Journey,’” 113.

12. Elizabeth Legassie, interview by Melody Maxwell and Samantha Diotte, January 30, 2020, transcript, Wolfville, NS.

13. Steeves, “Lived Experiences,” 43.

14. Christine MacDormand, interview by Melody Maxwell and Samantha Diotte, February 14, 2020, transcript, Wolfville, NS.

15. Miriam Uhrstrom, interview by Melody Maxwell and Samantha Diotte, April 28, 2020, transcript, Wolfville, NS.

and found resolution during a retreat in Ontario. In her words, “I finally just said, ‘Lord, I’m just going to be obedient to you because I feel that you are calling me and so I need to hear that and respond to that. I don’t fully understand all the scriptures.’”<sup>16</sup> As an evangelical, Neily wanted to interpret what the Bible said about women with integrity while at the same time following the call she felt God had placed on her life. Other interviewees felt the same way. Sara Palmater at first “shrugged off” the call she felt, since she believed women could not serve as ministers.<sup>17</sup> Yet she realized God could use her in a variety of ways, and she assented to that call. Unlike their male colleagues, these women had to grapple with their callings in a conservative denomination where some believed that the Bible prohibited women from serving as ministers. As a result, they likely felt more secure in their callings after examining the issue and making up their minds that God was asking them to serve. This confidence propelled them through difficult times in their ministries.

Zikmund et al. noted in *Clergy Women* that some women underwent memorable one-time experiences calling them to ministry, while for others the call was more gradual.<sup>18</sup> The same was true in my study. Ida Armstrong-Whitehouse was called at a specific point in time after she “laid the fleece out” and asked God to show her that she was being called to ministry.<sup>19</sup> On the other hand, Elizabeth Legassie recounted of her calling, “It was sort of a real gradual, gradual thing. I remember struggling with it, just that whole call and, of course, the aspect of being a woman.”<sup>20</sup> Sharon Budd had a similar experience. Because she did not have female role models in ministry, Budd found it hard to imagine

16. Kathy Neily, interview by Melody Maxwell and Samantha Diotte, December 11, 2019, transcript, Wolfville, NS.

17. Sara Palmater, interview by Melody Maxwell and Samantha Diotte, December 3, 2019, transcript, Wolfville, NS.

18. Zikmund et al., *Clergy Women*, 95. By contrast, most of the women Sarah Boberg interviewed experienced a gradual sense of call (Boberg, “Call Experiences,” 224).

19. Ida Armstrong-Whitehouse, interview by Melody Maxwell and Samantha Diotte, December 4, 2019, transcript, Wolfville, NS.

20. Elizabeth Legassie, interview by Melody Maxwell and Samantha Diotte, January 30, 2020, transcript, Wolfville, NS.

herself in that role. After teaching school for several years, she found herself wondering whether she was called to ministry. When she expressed this to a former Sunday-school teacher, that woman responded, "It's [ministry is] where you always belonged, but it's taken you a while to figure it out."<sup>21</sup> Budd's story demonstrates the importance of mentors in ministry who are willing to name the gifts they see in others, along with the challenges that women face in discerning their callings in conservative religious traditions. Budd also provides an example of a woman pursuing ministry as a second career, as Kathleen Steeves found prevalent in her study.<sup>22</sup>

Whether they felt called instantaneously or gradually, all the women in my study eventually acknowledged that God was calling them to ministry, even though this vocation might be challenging for them because of their sex. They persevered in the pursuit of their calling even as they sought clarity about the calling for themselves. Before they could become ordained ministers, however, additional schooling was required.

#### *Ministerial Education*

As Zikmund et al. note, educational requirements for ordained clergy increased in the twentieth century.<sup>23</sup> This was true for Canadian Baptist ministers as well as those in other contexts. Before they could be ordained, Atlantic Baptist ministers trained at Acadia Divinity College (ADC), the UBCAP's seminary, beginning in 1968. Overall, the women whom I interviewed recounted positive experiences with faculty and staff at ADC and mixed experiences with other students there. Their recollections revealed the typical attitudes of others in the UBCAP at the time toward women in ministry.

Mark Chaves found that the later in the twentieth century that women entered a seminary, the more likely they were to have a

21. Sharon Budd, interview by Melody Maxwell and Samantha Diotte, December 12, 2019, transcript, Wolfville, NS.

22. Steeves, "Lived Experiences," 27.

23. Zikmund et al., *Clergy Women*, 100.

positive experience with its faculty, as attitudes toward women in ministry rapidly changed.<sup>24</sup> The same was true of my interviewees. While their experience with faculty at ADC was largely positive, Ida Armstrong-Whitehouse described what she perceived as discrimination from a faculty member during her studies at ADC from 1972 to 1976, which was earlier than most others I interviewed. Armstrong-Whitehouse explained that female students in a course taught by ADC's principal received lower marks than did men. She also recalled that the principal was hesitant about her going into local-church ministry, preferring that her fiancé do so instead.<sup>25</sup> Based on Armstrong-Whitehouse's words, it seems that this seminary leader was biased against women in ministry, although Armstrong-Whitehouse noted that his views later changed.<sup>26</sup>

However, other interviewees recounted nothing but positive memories of ADC faculty and staff, who they felt encouraged them in ministry. Most of these women attended the seminary in the 1980s. "I felt totally accepted as a woman preparing for ministry," recounted Chris MacDormand.<sup>27</sup> "I always felt that the staff [and faculty] supported women in ministry," Sara Palmater concurred.<sup>28</sup> According to Miriam Uhrstrom, ADC's leaders said, "If God has called you, this is the right place for you, and we will help you be the person God has called you to be."<sup>29</sup> Joyce Hancock affirmed, "The professors were extremely encouraging."<sup>30</sup> Such recollections were widespread among interviewees and demonstrated the support they felt from ADC's fa-

24. Chaves, *Ordaining Women*, 88.

25. Ida Armstrong-Whitehouse, interview by Melody Maxwell and Samantha Diotte, December 4, 2019, transcript, Wolfville, NS.

26. *Ibid.*

27. Christine MacDormand, interview by Melody Maxwell and Samantha Diotte, February 14, 2020, transcript, Wolfville, NS.

28. Sara Palmater, interview by Melody Maxwell and Samantha Diotte, December 3, 2019, transcript, Wolfville, NS.

29. Miriam Uhrstrom, interview by Melody Maxwell and Samantha Diotte, April 28, 2020, transcript, Wolfville, NS.

30. Joyce Hancock, interview by Melody Maxwell and Samantha Diotte, January 30, 2020, transcript, Wolfville, NS.

culty and staff, especially in the 1980s. The seminary's leaders tended to be among those within the UBCAP who were the most supportive of women in ministry.<sup>31</sup>

However, reactions of male students toward the women I interviewed were mixed.<sup>32</sup> Elizabeth Legassie, who attended ADC in the 1970s, remembered those who opposed her presence there as “a small percentage, but . . . very vocal, and very strong.”<sup>33</sup> In fact, she considered ending her studies because of this opposition, but ultimately persevered because of her strong sense of calling. In Chris MacDormand's case, fellow students told her that she was “sinning against the Word,”<sup>34</sup> vocalizing their beliefs that the Bible forbade women from serving as ministers. Like Legassie, MacDormand found determination in her calling. She affirmed, “When you know in your knower, what you're supposed to be doing,”<sup>35</sup> then you do it. When Miriam Uhrstrom received comments from male students, she determined to interpret them positively. She said, “Everything anybody said to me, I always took it in a positive way and as a compliment. So, if someone said to me, ‘You're in my class, and you're a woman?’ I'd say, ‘Yeah.’ And I'd think that they must think it's a great idea. I would never take it as a negative thing.”<sup>36</sup> This strategy helped Uhrstrom navigate potential disagreements with optimism, whether sincere or forced. Sara Palmater recalled “a lot of undercurrents” regarding women in ministry during her time at ADC, but male students did not discuss them while she was present, whether out of avoidance or respect.<sup>37</sup> Several interview-

31. See Maxwell, “Proceed with Care.”

32. Interviewees did not mention receiving any negative reactions from female students.

33. Elizabeth Legassie, interview by Melody Maxwell and Samantha Diotte, January 30, 2020, transcript, Wolfville, NS.

34. Christine MacDormand, interview by Melody Maxwell and Samantha Diotte, February 14, 2020, transcript, Wolfville, NS.

35. Ibid.

36. Miriam Uhrstrom, interview by Melody Maxwell and Samantha Diotte, April 28, 2020, transcript, Wolfville, NS.

37. Sara Palmater, interview by Melody Maxwell and Samantha Diotte, December 3, 2019, transcript, Wolfville, NS.

wees, then, faced disapproval—whether overt or covert—from students who believed that women should not be preparing for ministry. While faculty members were convinced that female students had a place at ADC, comments from some male students demonstrated that they were not so sure about this. Facing such opposition, interviewees did not typically argue with detractors as some women in more liberal traditions might have done. Instead, they focused on their studies and recounted their call experiences to help them persevere through challenging circumstances.

Notably, more interviewees initially pursued a Master of Religious Education (MRE) degree at ADC rather than a Master of Divinity (MDiv) degree. The MRE was first offered in 1976 and was designed to prepare students for careers in Christian education, including working with young people in a church. Women traditionally served in such roles in many churches. Perhaps in response to fears about women seeking ordination, ADC's academic calendar noted that the degree "does *not* provide thorough pastoral training. It is *not* an abbreviated period of study leading to ordination."<sup>38</sup> In contrast, the MDiv was designed to prepare individuals for ordination and local-church pastorates and was traditionally the domain of men. Chris MacDormand noted that more female students were enrolled in the MRE program during her time at ADC and more men were enrolled in the MDiv program.<sup>39</sup> Sara Palmater, who was an MDiv student, noted that she was often the only woman in her classes. A female lecturer who taught adjunctively at ADC during the time told Palmater, "You're a pioneer, Sara! Look! Look around you!"<sup>40</sup> Thus she sought to encourage Palmater to continue her divinity studies and to lead other women to do the same. Although Kathy Neily pursued an MRE, she likewise felt encouragement to work to-

38. "Requirements," 38; italics in original.

39. Christine MacDormand, interview by Melody Maxwell and Samantha Diotte, February 14, 2020, transcript, Wolfville, NS.

40. Sara Palmater, interview by Melody Maxwell and Samantha Diotte, December 3, 2019, transcript, Wolfville, NS. Maxine Ashley was the lecturer. The first full-time, board-appointed female professor at ADC was Miriam Ross, beginning in 1985.



ward an MDiv, this time from the school's principal.<sup>41</sup> Thus, faculty urged female students to academic and ministerial achievements, despite the discouragement they received from some of their peers and sometimes their own reluctance. Some of the women were hesitant to complete the MDiv program because they felt their gifts and interests lay in religious education. On the other hand, Miriam Uhrstrom earned an MRE, in her words to the denomination's examining council, "because that was my weakest area."<sup>42</sup> Her actual motivation, however, appeared more complex, as she explained.

I don't think in the early 80s as many women were studying MDiv, because we all knew we would get our position in a church with an MRE. And you know, once you get into a church, the church congregation can ask you to do what it is they want you to do, and [First Baptist Church] Amherst wanted me to be ordained as a pastor. And so that's what happened. So, I did my extra work, 'cause I asked college, "Now that I'm here with an MRE, the church wants to ordain me as general pastor." And they said, "Well, you'll need more courses." So, I took them. I knew what I had to do to get to where I wanted to go.<sup>43</sup>

Uhrstrom believed that congregations were more likely to hire women to serve in religious education positions and might be threatened by women with MDiv degrees. She understood that once she obtained an initial church position with her MRE, she could take additional MDiv coursework toward ordination. Some of the other women I interviewed who earned MRE degrees did the same thing, perhaps strategically planning their educational paths within the confines of their denomination, as Uhrstrom did. As these women completed their studies and obtained ministry positions, they began to look toward ordination.

41. Kathy Neily, interview by Melody Maxwell and Samantha Diotte, December 11, 2019, transcript, Wolfville, NS.

42. Miriam Uhrstrom, interview by Melody Maxwell and Samantha Diotte, April 28, 2020, transcript, Wolfville, NS.

43. Ibid.

*Ordination*

Among Atlantic Baptists, ordination is a process that involves education, ministry experience, mentoring, and an interview with an examining council, among other elements. Many interviewees who participated in my study faced opposition during different points of the ordination process from men who did not approve of women's ordination. Still, they persisted and were ultimately successful in being ordained.

At least three interviewees felt discouraged by men in leadership from seeking ordination. Joyce Hancock perceived that the senior pastor with whom she ministered "wasn't really anxious for me to go into ordination right away."<sup>44</sup> Perhaps he feared that their church would be labeled as liberal with an ordained woman minister. Beyond the local-church level, some regional ministers also expressed hesitation about women's ordination. Sharon Budd met with multiple regional ministers whose associations did not agree with women in ministry, and they told her that she would have a hard time finding a job as a woman minister.<sup>45</sup> When Chris MacDormand contacted her regional minister for assistance, she reported receiving this response: "I am so busy that I only have time for the ordained pastors."<sup>46</sup> Rather than be discouraged by this comment, MacDormand determined at that time that she would seek ordination so that she would be treated equally. She also noted that she had more education than some men who were seeking ordination. She decided, "I'm just gonna finish this."<sup>47</sup> In this case, opposition increased MacDormand's determination to follow the course she believed God had for her life. This determination did not manifest itself in public protests against those who opposed her, but in private efforts to improve her status.

44. Joyce Hancock, interview by Melody Maxwell and Samantha Diotte, January 30, 2020, transcript, Wolfville, NS.

45. Sharon Budd, interview by Melody Maxwell and Samantha Diotte, December 12, 2019, transcript, Wolfville, NS.

46. Christine MacDormand, interview by Melody Maxwell and Samantha Diotte, February 14, 2020, transcript, Wolfville, NS.

47. *Ibid.*

Multiple interviewees encountered negative attitudes regarding their ordination from men on the UBCAP's examining council, which was made up of representatives from each of the denomination's associations. These representatives were mostly men. Some men (and women) in the denomination approved of women's ordination; others opposed it. The examining council, already a formal and much-feared part of the ordination process, was more challenging for some female candidates as a result, as Miriam Uhrstrom explained.

It was a very, very scary thing to prepare for ordination council. My husband . . . used to say, "Why are you worried about that? Why are you worried about that?" And I said . . . "I have to anticipate every question they're going to ask me so I can come up with an answer before they ask. And I know they're gonna ask, 'Why, as a woman, did you want to be ordained in pastoral ministry instead of CE [Christian education]? Why did you study CE instead of MDiv? Why did you do this? Why did you do that? What do you think of this? Why?'"<sup>48</sup>

Uhrstrom realized that as a female candidate for ordination, she would likely face more scrutiny than would male candidates.

This proved true for Uhrstrom and other women during their interviews with the examining council. Uhrstrom was asked, among other questions, what she would do if her husband did not want her to serve as a minister.<sup>49</sup> Sharon Budd was questioned about biblical passages forbidding a woman from usurping a man's authority, as other female candidates likely were.<sup>50</sup> Joyce Hancock was asked a question related to women in ministry but only later realized that was the topic the examiner wanted to discuss.<sup>51</sup> And an examiner asked deacons from Ida Armstrong-Whitehouse's church, who were observing the proceedings, how the men in her congregation felt about having a female min-

48. Miriam Uhrstrom, interview by Melody Maxwell and Samantha Diotte, April 28, 2020, transcript, Wolfville, NS.

49. Ibid.

50. Sharon Budd, interview by Melody Maxwell and Samantha Diotte, December 12, 2019, transcript, Wolfville, NS.

51. Joyce Hancock, interview by Melody Maxwell and Samantha Diotte, January 30, 2020, transcript, Wolfville, NS.

ister.<sup>52</sup> These women faced additional scrutiny of their calling and vocation because of their sex. The women also understood that no matter what they said, some members of the examining council would vote against them simply because they were women. Sharon Budd explained, “You knew going in that as a woman you were automatically going to get six negative votes that year.”<sup>53</sup> While discouraging, this did not stop the women from appearing before the ordination council to defend what they had learned from their studies and ministry experiences. Those who applied for ordination for religious education, rather than for general ministry, faced less opposition, although they were in the minority.<sup>54</sup> Most women sought—and eventually were granted—full ministerial ordination.

Chris MacDormand faced a challenging situation the day of her interview with the examining council. That morning, she received an anonymous letter in the mail condemning her for seeking ordination. She decided to take the letter with her to the interview. She recounted her conversation with the chief examiner as follows.

He said to me, “You know that within our convention that there are those who would prefer not to have, and who adamantly prefer not to have, women in ministry.” And I said, “Yes.” And he said, “Have you ever met anybody or had any situation where people opposed your moving toward ordination?” And I said, “As a matter of fact, I have.” And he said, “When?” And I said, “This morning.” I gave him the letter, and he read it.<sup>55</sup>

The examiner then dismissed the letter, since it was not signed, and proceeded to ask MacDormand only to share her testimony. She exclaimed, “I was out in like eighteen minutes.”<sup>56</sup>

52. Ida Armstrong-Whitehouse, interview by Melody Maxwell and Samantha Diotte, December 4, 2019, transcript, Wolfville, NS.

53. Sharon Budd, interview by Melody Maxwell and Samantha Diotte, December 12, 2019, transcript, Wolfville, NS.

54. Joyce Hancock, interview by Melody Maxwell and Samantha Diotte, January 30, 2020, transcript, Wolfville, NS.

55. Christine MacDormand, interview by Melody Maxwell and Samantha Diotte, February 14, 2020, transcript, Wolfville, NS.

56. *Ibid.*

The examiner, realizing the opposition that MacDormand faced, declined to challenge her further with his questioning. He thus demonstrated his support for women in ministry—support that the women I interviewed felt from some members of the examining council, at least from enough to pass their interviews. Perhaps other women did not pursue the ordination process because of the potential for opposition from within the UBCAP.<sup>57</sup>

### *Denominational Conflict*

Mark Chaves notes, “There has been conflict over women’s ordination within virtually every U.S. denomination.”<sup>58</sup> The same could be said of Canadian denominations. This issue came to a head within the UBCAP in the 1980s. In 1986, a convention delegate from New Brunswick gave notice of the following motion, which he made at the next year’s assembly: “I move that the examining council be directed in keeping with Biblical principles, no longer to examine women for Ordination to Pastoral Ministry.”<sup>59</sup> The topic became a significant and highly contested one among the denomination’s members leading up to the 1987 assembly.<sup>60</sup> At the assembly, discussion of the motion extended beyond the forty-two minutes allotted, with vigorous debate. Some of the women I interviewed attended this assembly and recalled their experiences there.

“Oh, glory,” Ida Armstrong-Whitehouse exclaimed when she learned of the motion. “Is this going to be the end of ordination for women?”<sup>61</sup> Sara Palmater, though, was “quite confident” the

57. I hope to conduct additional oral history interviews in the future with such women, along with those who may have dropped out during the process or who did not pass their interviews.

58. Chaves, *Ordaining Women*, 158.

59. The delegate was Rev. Donald MacDougall, acting on behalf of Rev. Lindsay Taylor, pastor of First Elgin United Baptist Church, New Brunswick. See Minutes of Executive Meeting.

60. See Maxwell, “Proceed with Care.”

61. Ida Armstrong-Whitehouse, interview by Melody Maxwell and Samantha Diotte, December 4, 2019, transcript, Wolfville, NS.

motion would be defeated.<sup>62</sup> None of the women, however, spoke publicly to the motion during the assembly. This is contrary to Chaves's observation that women seeking ordination are more likely than denominational elites to engage in "extrainstitutional tactics" to advance their cause within the denomination.<sup>63</sup> Perhaps because of their conservative convictions and environment, the women in this study used a strategy of silence during the denominational conflict.

Apparently, the women trusted that God would lead the right side to win, rather than trying to influence the assembly's vote. Elizabeth Legassie explained, "I just don't go into battle over it . . . I figured God would prevail and it would go the right way."<sup>64</sup> Miriam Uhrstrom and Sarah Palmater recalled counseling other women to remain silent as well. Uhrstrom advised, "'If you are where God has called you to be, just be confident in who you are, and don't worry about what anyone says.' I never got into debate with anybody."<sup>65</sup> In this way, she appealed again to the women's sense of divine calling to sustain them during a time of difficulty. Sara Palmater went further.

Some of the girls came to me, and they were really upset and, "What are we going to do? What are we going to do?" And I said, "We are going to do absolutely nothing. There are enough men in this denomination who support the ordination of women." And we still had our Baptist paper at that time, and I said, "If I see one of your names in that paper, I'm gonna kill ya . . . because we would be seen as radical feminists out to prove that we could do it and not obeying the call of God on our lives." And they said, "Well, what happens if . . . ?" and I said, "Then God's got another plan." You know, "Don't worry about it. We're following God's plan. That's all we're called to do."<sup>66</sup>

62. Sara Palmater, interview by Melody Maxwell and Samantha Diotte, December 3, 2019, transcript, Wolfville, NS.

63. Chaves, *Ordaining Women*, 172–73.

64. Elizabeth Legassie, interview by Melody Maxwell and Samantha Diotte, January 30, 2020, transcript, Wolfville, NS.

65. Miriam Uhrstrom, interview by Melody Maxwell and Samantha Diotte, April 28, 2020, transcript, Wolfville, NS.

66. Sara Palmater, interview by Melody Maxwell and Samantha Diotte, December 3, 2019, transcript, Wolfville, NS.

Like Uhrstrom, Palmater appealed to the women's sense of calling to urge them to strategic silence, using "God's plan" as a justification for inaction. Unlike Uhrstrom, Palmater explicitly expressed—at least during her interview—that silence was also a strategy to avoid further stigmatization within and possible rejection by the UBCAP.

Palmater and other interviewees, while embracing many of the goals of the feminist movement, were reluctant to be called feminists. "I wasn't really a women libber," Kathy Neily said.<sup>67</sup> "I've always avoided the word 'feminist,'" noted Sharon Budd.<sup>68</sup> Elizabeth Legassie added, "I don't think I've ever considered myself . . . an avid feminist."<sup>69</sup> Because of their conservative context and convictions, these women looked on feminists with skepticism and feared being associated with such a group by others in the convention. They worried that such an association would hurt rather than help their cause; others in the denomination would see them as liberals rather than as Bible-believing conservatives who happened to be women. The product of an evangelical denomination, the women eschewed what they considered the radicalism of the feminist movement while still benefiting from gains received from the movement for women in ministry.

While the women remained silent, many men from the UBCAP debated the resolution about women's ordination from the floor of the assembly.<sup>70</sup> In the final vote, the convention agreed decisively to continue ordaining women as ministers.<sup>71</sup> "All I can remember," Ida Armstrong-Whitehouse recounted,

67. Kathy Neily, interview by Melody Maxwell and Samantha Diotte, December 11, 2019, transcript, Wolfville, NS.

68. Sharon Budd, interview by Melody Maxwell and Samantha Diotte, December 12, 2019, transcript, Wolfville, NS.

69. Elizabeth Legassie, interview by Melody Maxwell and Samantha Diotte, January 30, 2020, transcript, Wolfville, NS.

70. One woman, Heather Davis, spoke during the debate—in favor of a woman's role in caring for her children (Lipe, "141st Atlantic Baptist Convention," 18).

71. Lipe, "141st Atlantic Baptist Convention," 19.

“was the fact that, in the end, I was still ordained.”<sup>72</sup> Although (or because?) they had not been vocal, the women had experienced a victory through the convention’s actions. In the years that followed, many more women would seek ordination.<sup>73</sup> Meanwhile, the interviewees from this project continued in the ministries to which they had been called, relying again on divine guidance to assist them in challenging circumstances.

### *Ministry Challenges*

The women who participated in this study served in a variety of ministry roles, including pastor, associate pastor, missionary, and chaplain. Scholars have noted that ordained Baptist women face challenges in ministry,<sup>74</sup> and this was true for the interviewees from this project as well. Several experienced ongoing opposition because of their sex. As Joyce Hancock put it, “I found that I was very often on the rejection side of things.”<sup>75</sup> Yet the women persevered in the ministries to which they felt called.

Church and even family members sometimes disapproved of the women’s service in ministry because of their belief that the Bible prohibited it. Sara Palmater’s mother remarked, “I wouldn’t want to have a female pastor.”<sup>76</sup> Palmater was dismayed to hear this, as that was the role in which she felt called to serve. More frequently, members of the churches in which the women worked made comments or took actions that demonstrated their disapproval of having female staff members. In Chris MacDormand’s case, a large group of university students and their leaders left West End Baptist Church when they found out

72. Ida Armstrong-Whitehouse, interview by Melody Maxwell and Samantha Diotte, December 4, 2019, transcript, Wolfville, NS.

73. I hope to interview many of these women for a future research project.

74. See Boberg, “Call Experiences,” 200–204, and Blevins, “Diverse Baptist Attitudes,” 71–76 among others.

75. Joyce Hancock, interview by Melody Maxwell and Samantha Diotte, January 30, 2020, transcript, Wolfville, NS.

76. Sara Palmater, interview by Melody Maxwell and Samantha Diotte, December 3, 2019, transcript, Wolfville, NS.



that she would be serving there.<sup>77</sup> When Ida Armstrong-Whitehouse was called to be the associate pastor of Bedford Baptist Church (rather than the less authoritative title of director of Christian education), “there was great debate in the deacon’s board,” and one deacon resigned.<sup>78</sup> First Baptist Church of Dartmouth, however, did assign Joyce Hancock the title of Christian education director, even though the male pastoral staff were all called ministers.<sup>79</sup> These women faced discrimination because of their sex. Although such challenges were difficult, these conservative women did not typically confront them head on. Their attitudes were generally like that of Ida Armstrong-Whitehouse, who stated, “I don’t have to feel like I have to prove [myself]. I just have to be faithful.”<sup>80</sup> Perhaps this type of quiet commitment and avoidance of conflict was a strategy that helped the women persevere even in difficult circumstances. Women with more radical perspectives may have acted otherwise.

In their study, Barbara Zikmund et al. note that women ministers “consistently report that they feel discrimination because they are not paid well.”<sup>81</sup> This was true of some of the women in my study. Some churches seemed to assume that male ministers were the primary breadwinners for their families but female ministers were only supplementing their husbands’ salaries. Chris MacDormand, for example, recalled that she did not go to the dentist for twenty-five years because of a lack of adequate health coverage.<sup>82</sup> Joyce Hancock also stated that she was underpaid by her church. She reported the following.

77. Christine MacDormand, interview by Melody Maxwell and Samantha Diotte, February 14, 2020, transcript, Wolfville, NS.

78. Ida Armstrong-Whitehouse, interview by Melody Maxwell and Samantha Diotte, December 4, 2019, transcript, Wolfville, NS. This deacon later changed his mind and supported Armstrong-Whitehouse.

79. Joyce Hancock, interview by Melody Maxwell and Samantha Diotte, January 30, 2020, transcript, Wolfville, NS.

80. Ida Armstrong-Whitehouse, interview by Melody Maxwell and Samantha Diotte, December 4, 2019, transcript, Wolfville, NS.

81. Zikmund et al., *Clergy Women*, 72.

82. Christine MacDormand, interview by Melody Maxwell and Samantha Diotte, February 14, 2020, transcript, Wolfville, NS.

I think it was some of the women in the congregation, when it came around to budget time, they made a big deal about the fact that I was earning much, much less than the rest of the pastoral team. And they came forward and said they would not accept if I, if it had not gotten better. I also didn't know about that discussion because it went on with the lead pastor and maybe the associate pastor. But what I heard from the lead pastor later on was, "Wow, you're getting a good increase this time! Aren't you lucky?" instead of words like, you know, "The church has asked that, that you be put up more to the level of the vision." It was more like, "Well, aren't you lucky?"<sup>83</sup>

Hancock's situation revealed the sexism of her lead pastor along with that of the congregation as a whole while also demonstrating the growing awareness of equality among a few female congregants. Also significant was that Hancock herself did not bring up the issue of her remuneration; she again remained silent. Whether this strategy compromised her ministry or was necessary to preserve it is debatable. What is clear is that Hancock, like the other women involved in this study, did not pursue feminist activism in the course of her ministry, preferring instead to keep her head down and serve as she had been called.

Interviewees faced opposition to their ministries beyond the local church as well. When she served on the mission field in Brazil with Canadian Baptists, Joyce Hancock said, "[My colleagues] excluded me from a number of things and kind of sometimes pretended I wasn't there."<sup>84</sup> She was not treated as the equal of ordained missionaries who were male. Sara Palmater experienced similar discrimination within the Queens-Sunbury Association, where she noted that there were "two very strong opponents" of women in ministry.<sup>85</sup> Comparable situations occurred in other associations and within the UBCAP as a whole, as previously discussed. Sharon Budd discovered this firsthand during a break from a convention meeting at ADC. She reported as follows.

83. Joyce Hancock, interview by Melody Maxwell and Samantha Diotte, January 30, 2020, transcript, Wolfville, NS.

84. Ibid.

85. Sara Palmater, interview by Melody Maxwell and Samantha Diotte, December 3, 2019, transcript, Wolfville, NS.

A number of other male pastors came in, and they would introduce themselves to each other, and they started talking about ministry issues, and one of them interested me, so I made a comment, you know, to inject myself into the conversation, and the conversation stopped. And so, I said, "Uhh, okay." So, then they started talking about something else. So, I interjected myself again and made a comment, and the conversation stopped, and I thought, "I could keep them changing their conversation all afternoon! All I have to do is keep interjecting!" But I didn't. I went back [to] reading my book.<sup>86</sup>

The pastors in the room with Budd ignored her, perhaps thinking that a woman in ministry was not worthy of a voice. Her response demonstrated her reluctance to be seen as a woman with an agenda; she decided not to continue interacting with the men. Thus, she appropriated the same strategy of silence that other women in this study used. They found that persevering in their ministries was more fruitful than arguing with those who disagreed with their presence as ordained women.

### *Conclusion*

The eight women interviewed for this project, ordained by the UBCAP between 1976 and 1987, were indeed pioneers, as Sara Palmater's professor affirmed. In order to negotiate challenges in their calling, education, ordination, denomination, and ministry, the women often remained strategically silent while relying on their spiritual sense of calling to sustain them in difficult times. As evangelicals, the women prioritized personal experience and piety in their ministries while avoiding actions that would have labeled them as liberals. Pragmatically, they realized that loudly advocating for the cause of women in ministry would have brought further opposition. As Joyce Hancock recalled, "Had I pushed the limits and wanted to be recognized as a pastor, I think there would have been a lot of trouble with that."<sup>87</sup> Theological-

86. Sharon Budd, interview by Melody Maxwell and Samantha Diotte, December 12, 2019, transcript, Wolfville, NS.

87. Joyce Hancock, interview by Melody Maxwell and Samantha Diotte, January 30, 2020, transcript, Wolfville, NS.

ly, the women themselves were conservative, as were other members of their denomination. They appealed not to feminist rhetoric but to a divine calling to justify their ministries.

In response to a man who questioned whether women should be in ministry, Miriam Uhrstrom echoed the words of her camp counselor decades before: “You know, Jim, if Jesus asked me to be a pastor, and I said, ‘No, I can’t ’cause I’m a woman . . . that’d be disobedient.”<sup>88</sup> Like the other women in this study, Uhrstrom believed that her ministry was a response to God’s call. She thus persevered through opposition by working to fulfill that calling, focusing on using her voice to serve God rather than to justify her presence in the church. Such a strategy fit within the faith of these early women ordained by Atlantic Baptists and enabled them to minister successfully within their challenging context.

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88. Miriam Uhrstrom, interview by Melody Maxwell and Samantha Diotte, April 28, 2020, transcript, Wolfville, NS.

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