

How Uniting Church in Australia clergy, particularly females, experience and deal with stress in ministry.

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ABSTRACT

The focus of this study is how Uniting Church in Australia (UCA) clergy, particularly females, experience and deal with stress in ministry. The stress experience of female clergy in Australia is an unstudied phenomenon and this research represents an attempt to address this research gap. Although the study has a particular focus on female UCA clergy, three of the clergy interviewed were male. The reason for this sampling choice was to provide opportunity for exploring gender differences in relation to the clergy stress experience.

Since the study seeks to understand the lived experience of stress of UCA clergy, particularly females, a qualitative narrative methodology informed by heuristic and constructivist approaches to analysis has been used. A narrative approach assumes that the experience of stress can only be adequately understood within the context of a person's life, including their social and cultural context. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight members of the UCA clergy to obtain narratives about their experience of stress in ministry. As an insider researcher, my story as a member of the UCA clergy is included to provide the reader with an understanding of the interpretive framework through which I view the participant narratives. The study emphasises a philosophical position that argues that the experience of stress can only be adequately understood against the back drop of the context in which a person lives.

Although there are some commonalities between the male and female narratives, the stories show evidence of particular stressors for females in ministry and that there may be differences in the ways that male and female clergy respond to stress.

The stories of the participants in the study also suggest that female UCA clergy are still pioneers. UCA female clergy still face discrimination, although the denomination has ordained female clergy since its inception in 1977.

The research leads to a number of recommendations relating to the following needs: development of a clearer understanding of 'call' in the UCA; education of congregations in relation to the reason the UCA has female ministers; examination of the UCA model of church

leadership; stress management for ministers and education of Presbyteries in relation to gender differences and stress.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Advisory Committee on Ministerial Placements (ACOMP) – A synod (State) established committee with the responsibility of oversight of Uniting Church clergy.

Assembly – Assembly is the national council of the UCA. It has determining responsibilities in relation to doctrine, worship, government and mission.

Basis of Union – The Basis of Union is the formational document of the UCA. It was written in 1971 and has guided the UCA since its inception in 1977.

Candidate – A candidate is someone who has been accepted by the UCA to enter the process of ministerial training. A candidate is therefore someone who has convinced the UCA that they have a genuine call to ministry.

Clergy – The term clergy is a synonym for ordained ministers.

Congregation – A congregation is seen to be the embodiment, in one place, of the church. Local congregations are where the majority of UCA clergy carry out their ministry.

Joint Nominating Committee (JNC) – A JNC is formed when a congregation searches for a new minister. The JNC is responsible for a process which leads to them recommending a minister to the congregation. A JNC is made up of at least two members of Presbytery and two to six people appointed by the congregation.

Minister – In the context of this research minister refers to a UCA Minister of the Word. A minister in the UCA has been through the process of ministerial training and been accepted into ministry through a service of ordination.

Ministry formation – The process of training a candidate for ministry. It involves education (both theological and pastoral), practical experience in ministry (field education) and substantial times of personal and group reflection.

Moderator – The moderator of a Synod has general and pastoral leadership over ministers and congregations within the state.

Ordination – The accepting of a candidate for ministry into the ranks of ministers of the UCA. It takes place in a worship service and includes prayer and the laying on of hands. The minister agrees to come under the discipline of the UCA and abide by its ministerial code of ethics.

Parish – A parish refers to one or more congregations which are recognised by Presbytery as one pastoral and administrative unit. Although this term ceased to be an official UCA term in April 2000, it remains a commonly used term within the UCA.

Presbytery – A regional council of the UCA representing a collection of congregations.

President – The president presides over the Assembly (National Council) of the UCA.

Stipend – A minister's income. When working within a congregation, it is the congregation who is responsible for the stipend. In some instances, congregations receive Synod grants to assist in the payment of their minister.

Synod – A state council of the UCA

Uniting Church in Australia (UCA) – The UCA was formed in 1977 through the coming together of three existing protestant denominations. These were the Methodist, the Congregational and the Presbyterian Churches. Some Presbyterian Churches chose to stay outside union and to continue independently of the UCA.

UCA regulations – A document that assists in guiding and giving directions to the UCA. The regulations assist in ensuring that various processes in the life of the church are carried out appropriately. The regulations further assist in providing accountability.

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