



women thriving in ministry

AN INITIATIVE OF ASBURY THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

Program Curriculum

written by Rev. Ashlee Alley
Crawford and Rev. Dianne
Lawhorn

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Foundations of Curriculum:

The call of being a pastor is a gift, a blessing, and a joy for the one who says yes. It is also a challenge and a privilege. Clergy engage in seminary or courses of study for ministry leadership, but it is impossible to prepare a person for both the learning curve of pastoral ministry and the possible struggles that a leader of a spiritual community will face. At its inception, the Women Thriving in Ministry program sought “to help women move from threatened to thriving” with the following objectives:

- Offer community amid isolation
- Nurture identity formation as pastoral leaders
- Connect those who may have a lack of support from local congregations, families, or denominational leadership
- Develop pastors who can face ministry challenges with faithful decision-making

The Women Thriving in Ministry curriculum takes a small group of pastors who may or may not know one another and provides opportunities to build connections—with God and with one another. It also invites participants to reflect meaningfully and cultivate spiritual practices that root them in the Triune God to help them endure the difficulties they will surely face.

The program was launched in the summer of 2020 and included regular conversation by a small group of experienced clergy women who would serve as mentors. These pastors drew on their own experiences as well as the unveiling reality about what is needed to thrive as a woman in the current context. Leadership and pastoral formation would become foundational to the curriculum. As the mentors reflected on our experiences and heard back from participants, it was clear that what was most needed by the new pastors was support to navigate their isolation, lack of support, and challenges. What emerged was a two-fold focus: coaching through developing challenges and support in pastoral formation. Ultimately, we knew that the best support that we could offer our participants was soul care.

The final component of the monthly meeting times was something that actually started before the groups even met: prayerful preparation. In most of our learning modules, we invite all participants to spend some time in preparation—sometimes practical and sometimes reflective—so that they may be able to lean into what God is speaking to them. The preparation was enhanced with group spiritual direction and spiritual readings. Our hope was that this

curriculum would help clergy women to benefit from practical knowledge, as they grew in leadership formation, also that they would receive the spiritual care that is so vital in encouraging life-long, thriving ministry.

Who Was It Written For:

When the Women Thriving in Ministry program was launched, it was intended to be directed towards Clergy Women who are serving in their first five years of pastoral ministry. While the program wasn't intended only for young Clergy Women, many of our participants do happen to be young. The women—both mentors and participants—who were a part of the initial group were a diverse group of pastors serving congregations of all sizes and in a half dozen different denominations. Several served outside the local church as chaplains in various settings. While many of our participants also were engaged in programs for new pastors in their denominational structure, they sought this program to build community, mentorship, and support as they grew into their pastoral identity. Some intentionally sought connection outside of their “official” structures. It is also important to note that our intended guides or facilitators of these groups would be experienced women clergy who are thriving in ministry.

How To Use this Curriculum:

In developing this curriculum, we wanted it to provide enough guidance so that the mentors wouldn't feel like they had to come up with their own lesson plans every month. We also wanted there to be enough freedom that they felt they could be open to the Spirit as they led these sessions. We would encourage you to use this as a guide and also to find ways to make it your own. The curriculum is designed for a cycle of two years and includes 22 lessons in four modules, with a closing meeting.

Lessons 1-6	Introductions and Forming a Community
Lessons 7-11	Cultivating Pastoral Practices
Lessons 12-15	Flourishing in Ministry
Lessons 16-21	Discerning God's Voice: The Clearness Committee
Lesson 22	Closing Meeting: Celebration and Transition

If an 18-month cycle is more desirable for a group, simply skip lessons 16-21 and conclude with lesson 22.

Mentors should read through each lesson and make sure to share any preparation or “homework” assignments that should be completed prior to the group meeting. These assignments can be found within the lesson text, as well as several mentor-specific notations.

Additionally, each 24-month or 18-month group meeting cycle includes two built-in fellowship/Sabbath months that can be used at any time during the duration of the life of the group. For example, we gave the option to either take December “off” or invited one of the participants to plan a Christmas “party” for us. We held virtual Christmas parties, but groups meeting in person could include a meal or other shared fellowship opportunity.

The basic rhythm of each lesson includes a check-in or an ice breaker, a review and discussion of the practical element that we are teaching, a deeper conversation about the spiritual dimension of that element that may include a group spiritual direction conversation or a spiritual reading or reflection. Each session ends with prayer.

As each of us led the curriculum for our own groups, we found that we both used it similarly: we adhered very closely to the lesson plan and also found ways to personalize it. We responded to the invitations as a way to model sharing for the check-in question and reflection on the practical content that the participants were learning. If there was reflective work that they were asked to do, we also did this reflection and shared insights hoping to enhance our sharing time.

While those who lead through this curriculum are really serving as facilitators or guides to the process, it was also intended that we would be companions in the process. Our companionship was intended to be that of a mentor. We knew that our participants would benefit from hearing our insights and reflections on what it means to thrive in ministry. We believe that sharing these insights and reflections, in moderation, greatly enhances the overall experience in the groups.

Rev. Ashlee Alley Crawford is an ordained elder in the Great Plains United Methodist Conference. She is in her ninth-year working in the Great Plains Office of Clergy Excellence directing a young clergy leadership program, in addition to overseeing recruitment and other clergy development programming. Prior to this work, she worked for 12 years in Campus Ministry. She will graduate with a Doctorate of Ministry with an emphasis in Spiritual Direction from Asbury Theological Seminary in May 2023. Ashlee is particularly interested in two divergent—yet connected—aspects of ministry life: supporting people as they explore a call to ministry and walking alongside ministry leaders as they are navigating burnout.

Rev. Dianne Lawhorn is an Ordained Elder in the United Methodist Church, with over twenty years of ministry experience in pastoral positions. For the past 10 years, Dianne has also served the Western North Carolina Conference through Extension Ministries, whereby she consults with individuals and organizations who seek to create space for God to nurture growth and strengthen souls toward vibrant spiritual wholeness. Over the course of her ministry, Dianne has developed expertise in creating and sustaining cultures for spiritual growth. Those whom she has served comment on her unique way of making the word of God a living and relevant thing in their lives. They report valuing her spiritual insight and discipline and they credit her with creatively casting a vision for the future and mobilizing people to achieve their dreams and goals. It is Dianne's greatest joy to serve the Lord through living out her passion for pursuing renewal in and beyond the Church through spiritual transformation!