



BEN SMIDT PHOTOS

Madison's ordained clergy include (front) Amanda Stein of Trinity United Methodist; (middle row, from left) Laurie Zimmerman of Shaarei Shamayim and Erica Liu of Pres House; (back, from left) Tonya Flamer Wenger of Madison Mennonite, Deborah Dean-Ware of Orchard Ridge UCC, Julie Overman of Lake Edge UCC, Renee Bauer of Mayyim Rabim in the Twin Cities, and Tisha Brown of Community of Hope UCC. These and other young women ministers meet monthly for mutual support and constructive feedback.

# Women of faith



Vestments and other religious garb, from several faith communities, make for a colorful mix of fabrics, heritage and hope.

Young female clergy meet monthly and find they have much in common

The dictionary defines "faith" as an "unquestioning belief that does not require proof or evidence," and the word is a generic reference for all types of religious communities.

Great diversity exists, among faith leaders as well as their centers for worship, but that doesn't seem to matter much when one group of ordained clergy gathers monthly to talk shop. All are women, ages 28-35, who are on their first or second jobs in ministry.

Regardless of whether the title is rabbi or pastor, the denomination Mennonite or Methodist, they encounter unusual circumstances and challenges because of age, gender and stereotypes in their male-dominated profession.

"We are trying to forge new paths as young women clergy, and we often look to each other for the support and strength we need to take risks and make difficult decisions," says Rabbi Laurie Zimmerman of Shaarei Shamayim, 203 S. Paterson St. Her partner, Rabbi Renee

Bauer, works with the Twin Cities' Mayim Rabim congregation and elsewhere.

"I need a place to talk freely about issues that I struggle with," says the Rev. Erica Liu. She and her husband, the Rev. Mark Elsdon, are campus co-pastors at Pres House, 731 State St.

Some wear street clothes, not vestments, in the pulpit. Others prefer the term "ritual garb." They are married, single, single moms, lesbians in and out of committed relationships.

All have experienced a subtle disregard for their title and work, being mistaken for church secretaries or pastoral assistants. All find support and feedback during these monthly peer gatherings, despite theological or political differences.

"We all have limitations, but we all strive to serve faithfully," says the Rev. Julie Overman of Lake Edge United Church of Christ, 4200 Buckeye Road.

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# Faith

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They discuss matters of boundaries. Can you be friends, or just friendly, with congregational members? How do you keep congregational expectations realistic, to avoid turning all of life into one caregiving realm on top of another?

"I've been enlightened by what other single moms go up against," Overman says.

The integration of professional and personal lives can be a struggle, so coming to these monthly meetings, she says, "is like taking a bubble bath."

Juggling the personal and professional is also a challenge for the Rev. Tisha Brown.

"I'm trying to do this in a sustainable way," Brown says of her professional life at Community of Hope UCC, 7118 Old Sauk Road. "I don't have a partner to help me do this — I'm on my own and want to avoid leaving a church bitter, angry or exhausted."

The group's congregations tend to be relatively progressive, says the Rev. Deborah Dean-Ware of Orchard Ridge UCC, 1501 Gilbert Road, but some waters are untested. "There are no models of sustainability for us. We are co-creating this together."

Some acknowledge awkward moments because they are new in their work. A parishioner with prostate cancer may not want a hospital visit. Older members may be inclined not to take young clergy seriously, regardless of gender.

"The authority issue, for me, is not as difficult as it would have been for my mom in the '70s," says the Rev. Amanda Stein of Trinity United Methodist Church, 1123 Vilas Ave. She and Zimmerman met 13 years ago, while both were UW students building houses for Habitat for Humanity.

wishes her husband had a peer support group, a thought that prompts her colleagues to titter. They have busted "minister's wife" assumptions.

Each woman is aware that major clergy shortages are predicted, which can compound challenges.

"There already are more retired clergy in (the United Methodist denomination) than active," notes Stein.

Brown says, "This group gives me a lot of hope for the church. It is an institution that can feel like it's dying."

There is a lot of talk about the unaffiliated — people who haven't latched onto a faith community.

"There's a difference in the way generations approach church," observes Tonya Ramer Wenger, pastor of Madison Mennonite Church, which worships on Sunday nights at Orchard Ridge.

Sometimes that causes tension between generations, or a solo quest for spirituality without institutional ritual.

"But look at how much more good we can accomplish by working in community," Overman argues.

Theirs is a generation that may want something different than what they grew up with, or yearn to learn about traditions that their parents didn't keep. Liu points to a resurgence of interest in ancient religious traditions, from mystics and elsewhere, and kids re-writing old hymns, or Beatles' songs, making them their own.

Dean-Ware says, "It's a new kind of ministry," one in which the religious experience must feel authentic and relevant if it is to thrive, or survive.

Particularly in today's political climate, Zimmerman says.

"As a group, we have had many important conversations about putting forth progressive religious perspectives in a time when religion is often synonymous with conservative, right-wing politics," Zimmerman says.