This chapter highlights some of the findings of a 1999 national study of 324 black female and 448 black male Master of Divinity graduates, with special attention given to the status of women in ministry. How well are black women advancing as professionals within the ministerial ranks? In the face of sexism, there are clearly a few important factors that enhance the advancement of clergywomen. Among these are hard work and an understanding that the Scriptures, which on the surface appear prohibitive, were written for particular situations and not intended for universal application against all women for all time, everywhere. Another asset for female clergy is the acquisition of a graduate theological education. It better prepares them to serve God’s people. It helps women to see themselves in ways that the churches, which birthed their calls to ministry, often cannot. Further, it is clear that the Black Church needs affirmative action–type programs to open more doors for qualified female ministers. It will take time and resolve to deprogram the negative ideas that so many persons systematically have been taught about women in the pulpit. Sadly, such prohibitive teaching and preaching is still believed to be sacred truth in many places.

To pursue a professional career in any field, one needs to know how many jobs are available to him or her. From my studies of black female Master of Divinity graduates in 1985, 1992, and 1999, it is clear that most of the ministerial positions available in the profession are in
pastorate and assistant pastorate positions. In the 1999 sample of 324 clergywomen, 69 were paid, full-time pastors and 32 were paid, part-time pastors. This is a combined total of 101 women pastors. Thirty-nine were paid, full-time assistant pastors and 62 were paid, part-time assistant pastors. This makes for an additional total of 101 women assistant pastors. Together, in my study, women as pastor and assistant pastor comprise an opportunity structure of 202 positions. This one pastoral category includes the lion’s share of ministerial jobs. For this basic reason, the focus of this essay is upon ministry within the institutional church. I am well aware of the brilliant parachurch ministries that black women are leading. Opposition to women securing paid employment in the church has forced them into significant nontraditional ministries that have also added to the witness of the Body of Christ. For example, black clergywomen are making major contributions in the areas of counseling and global missions. It is hoped that they can continue to build upon these inroads at the same time more doors are being opened for women in the church.

In 1985, only 11 percent of the total 120 women considered were full-time pastors. In 1992 36 percent were full-time pastors. While there had been an increase in the percentage of women who had pastored in the first two studies, there was a decline in 1999. In numerical terms, the number of paid, full-time women pastors in the study rose from 13 in 1985 to 73 in 1992; it declined to 69 in 1999. Although the most recent seven-year decline is much smaller than the previous seven-year increase, this finding substantiates the need for a more concerted advocacy to produce a positive, progressive advancement of black clergywomen.

Another important factor is salary. Overall, the salaries for ministry-related jobs are quite low for black men and women. However, they are even lower for women. While the mean for men falls within the $30,000 range, the mean for women falls within the $25,000 range. This is a salary gap of $5,000. This is especially limiting for the 71 percent of the single women in the 1999 study who have primary responsibility for raising children.

Some black women say, “I can be an assistant, but I don’t want to be a pastor.” Speculation is that some of the women who say this are fearful of rejection, are lacking same-sex mentoring, or perhaps are fearful of success itself. Some are entrenched in the traditional teachings of men being the head of the home and the church, in the imaging of God as an anthropomorphic father. Such perceptions limit women and render them incapable of fully utilizing their gifts and talents in church and society.