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Barriers Inhibiting Women's Path to the Pulpit and the Gender Gap in Compensation

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the gender gap in Protestant churches' leadership and its connection to head clergy compensation, using the National Study of Congregations' Economic Practices (NSCEP) data. The analysis reveals that women's leadership as head clergy is most common within smaller and theologically liberal churches and during a time of declining membership. These findings imply that clergywomen face both the barrier of a glass ceiling and the disadvantages of a glass cliff, which limits their access to the pulpits that lead to greater compensation and prestige. The analysis also indicates that head clergy compensation is primarily determined by congregational characteristics, most importantly by church size, and the underrepresentation of women in larger churches' leadership is what drives the gender pay gap for Protestant clergy. Still, the findings hint that the bottom-up pressure created by the expectations for gender equality from highly educated congregants may help dismantle the barriers for clergywomen.

Church leadership has long been a male-dominated occupation, and women were traditionally prohibited from congregational leadership (Adams 2007; Konieczny and Chaves 2000). Certain denominations, including Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches, still do not ordain women (Chaves 1997b; Wessinger 1996). Although the percentage of clergywomen in most Protestant denominations has continued to increase since the 1970s, women are still underrepresented in church leadership, making up approximately 13% of the head or senior pastors in US Protestant churches (Dawes 2022; Whitehead 2022). While the percentage of women in senior leadership has remained relatively steady in recent decades, it continues to trail behind the ongoing increase in the proportion of women among graduates of theological schools and seminaries (Hoegeman 2017; Lee 2024b; Phelps 2023). Even in the 1980s, women made up more than 20% of the seminary enrollment in the United States and Canada (Hyer 1981). In 2023, the ratio of women to men enrolled in Association of Theological Schools (ATS) member

institutions was 0.62. (ATS 2023). The slower-than-anticipated growth of women's church leadership prompts the need to continue to address the question of what contributes to this gap.

An understudied dimension of the gender gap in church leadership is the fact that clergywomen often work in different situations and are treated differently from clergymen. Research finds that clergywomen experience disparities in terms of power, influence, and treatment by other church leaders and lay members (Campbell-Reed 2019; Phelps 2023). Studies also report that women as congregational leaders face different institutional situations, being more likely to be placed in smaller and economically precarious institutions (Hoegeman 2017; Lee 2024a; Royle 1982). Further, the gender gap in the pulpit is manifested in disparities of financial compensation for pastors. Research finds that clergywomen earn smaller salaries compared with clergymen even when levels of education, skill sets, and other

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traits are controlled (Ferguson 2018; Millard 2021; Schleifer and Miller 2017). According to a recent study by Church Pension Group (2023), the median compensation of Episcopalian lead clergymen is 14% higher than that of lead clergywomen in 2022. A similar sized gap has been reported in many other denominations (Bethune 2021; Durso 2017).

In sum, not only are women underrepresented as congregational leaders, but those in leadership also continue to face unequal treatment despite the increasing concerns and continued dialogues about women's empowerment across many Protestant denominations (Marumo 2016; Millard 2021). As a result, women's leadership in the church is more common in principle than in practice; women confront greater challenges compared to men not only in their path to the pulpit but also in the particular circumstances and congregational contexts to which they have been called (Chaves and Eagle 2015; Leach 2017).

The persistent gender inequality of access to the pulpit and the treatment in the pulpit may discourage women in seminaries from entering a ministerial career and lead to higher turnover of young clergywomen, which will exacerbate the gender imbalance in church leadership (Ferguson 2015). Recent surveys also report that women's church attendance has been declining faster than men's, and neither women's gain in educational level nor the increase in their labor force participation explains the decline (McClendon 2016). In fact, studies report that there is no longer a gender gap in church attendance for younger generations (Burge 2022).

It is not clear whether the underrepresentation of women in church leadership and unequal treatment of clergywomen have directly caused the decline in women's religiosity and church attendance. Still, research suggests that having more women in congregational leadership can help faith communities become more diverse and inclusive places (Willingham 2023). Diversity and inclusion within congregations are crucial because these faith communities are not just places of worship, but they impact people's lives directly through their involvement in health care and education, as well as issues of equity and justice. Perhaps more importantly, research emphasizes that clergywomen bring a different set of life experiences to the ministry and have ability to cope with challenges and conflicts related to gender, including the struggle against gender-based violence, motherhood, and ills that affect women and girls, which was generally not available under male-dominant leadership structure (Bammert 2010; Cazarin and Grier 2018; Chang 1997; Chisale 2020). With the silent exodus of women from churches and the distinct role that women in leadership play in faith communities, understanding the gender gap in religious leadership and improving gender inequality in terms of representation and equitable treatment of clergywomen is more important than ever.

In this study, we examine how congregational characteristics are associated with women's congregational leadership, focusing on the organizational contexts that may affect gender-based leadership biases and stereotypes, while investigating how clergy compensation is related to the lead pastor's gender simultaneously. If there are congregational characteristics that affect the likelihood of selecting a woman as the lead pastor and these factors are

also related to compensation, the selection effect must be considered concurrently in examining clergy compensation. To put it succinctly, when assessing women's leadership as head clergy in Protestant congregations, it makes sense to address questions of clergy pay and the barriers to the pulpit together. This approach seeks to contribute a broader understanding of the nature of the gender pay gap for Protestant clergy and its implications.

1 | Barriers to Women's Congregational Leadership

Across Christian history, the majority of churches have interpreted scripture and tradition to instill traditional gender roles where men hold authority over women (Haskins 2003). Women's involvement has been constrained within these gender roles, and many traditions have restricted the top leadership positions to only clergymen, denying clergywomen the same opportunities (Ferguson 2018). In understanding women's more recent journey into congregational leadership, we focus on three concepts associated with gendered leadership structure that have been applied across diverse organizational fields. The first concept is the glass ceiling, defined as implicit barriers inhibiting women's advancement to leadership positions (Baxter and Wright 2000). The glass ceiling is created by stereotypes and biases that view women as less capable and less legitimate as organizational leaders than men (Glass and Cook 2020). Next, there is the glass cliff theory, which posits that women are more likely to take precarious leadership positions characterized by a higher probability of failure than men (Cook and Glass 2014; Ryan et al. 2016). Lastly, this study examines the "bottom-up" pressure for increased diversity, whereby the pressure for hiring a woman as a lead pastor comes from the laity. These three concepts help to illustrate the gendered barriers to the pulpit, and this study tests the following hypotheses.

1.1 | Glass Ceiling

Perceptions regarding women's capacity and legitimacy as leaders are affected by various external and internal organizational contexts. The literature suggests that the presumed gender differences in leadership qualifications become greater when the importance and authority associated with the position increases (Baxter and Wright 2000; Ridgeway 2001). Leadership positions in larger organizations come with greater authority, and women experience more challenges and resistance regarding their fitness for those positions (Glass and Cook 2016; Gupta et al. 2018). The prevailing view on gendered leadership also posits that women have an advantage over men in relational leadership styles while associating leadership traits such as competence and goal orientation with male leaders (Aaldering and Van Der Pas 2020; Cann and Siegfried 1990). Such perspectives can limit women's place to smaller organizations where leaders are in more direct contact with individual members (Blum et al. 1994; Goodman et al. 2003). Research indeed finds that, regardless of organizational type, organizational size is negatively associated with the likelihood of having a woman as the leader, with the proportion of women in top leadership positions decreasing rapidly as the organizational size increases (Lee 2019; Mun and Jung 2018).

In church ministries as well, there exist gendered stereotypes that clergywomen provide more personalized care and have a less hierarchical leadership style compared to clergymen, which contributes to limiting women's congregational leadership to smaller churches where pastors are expected to have more direct and frequent interaction with congregants (Perl 2002; Stevens 1989). This gendered perception persists throughout clergywomen's careers, and their access is circumscribed even when they gain more experience. For example, Carroll's (2006) study of mainline Protestant churches reports that clergywomen and clergymen generally hold similar positions in the first decade after ordination, but their path takes a different turn in the second decade; 70% of clergymen moved on to minister medium or large-sized congregations while only 37% of clergywomen did. A recent study by Bowler (2019) also finds that less than 1% of megachurches in the United States were led by a woman in 2018. Such research findings suggest that the glass ceiling is more pervasive in larger churches, and this study hypothesizes a negative association between church size and the likelihood of women's congregational leadership.

H1-1. *Churches with a greater number of participants are less likely to have a woman as their lead pastor.*

Another important congregational characteristic that can determine the pervasiveness of a glass ceiling within a church is its theological orientation. Most importantly, conservative theological doctrine and scriptural interpretations may forbid women's ordination or their authority and therefore affect the acceptance of women's congregational leadership. Although an increasing number of women graduate from seminaries and other theological programs, they are still barred from the highest leadership positions in churches with conservative theological orientations that ban women from serving as congregational leaders. For instance, the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), the largest Protestant denomination, does not support the ordination of women (Wingfield 2021). In 2023, SBC expelled five congregations, including Saddleback Church in California, one of the largest congregations in the United States, for ordaining women as pastors (Dias and Graham 2023). In theologically conservative institutions, women are excluded from occupying top leadership roles, and they take on auxiliary leadership positions, such as music directors and children's ministry pastors (Knoll and Bolin 2018; Wood 2019). Of course, formal rules regarding women's congregational leadership and actual practices within a church are "loosely coupled," and there could be little difference in the status of clergywomen between liberal and conservative congregations (Chaves 1997a; 1997b). As Sullins (2000) suggests, the implementation of formal policy allowing women's ordination may be an official response to the universal hegemony of gender equality, and it does not automatically lead to actual acceptance of women's leadership within a church. Nevertheless, adopting formal rules allowing women's ordination opens up opportunities for advocating gender equalities in church leadership (Chaves 1997a), and the more closed stance of theologically conservative churches on women's congregational leadership imply that even the loose coupling may be much more restricted in those institutions. The majority of scholarship has continued to suggest that conservative theological orientation is a major source of resistance to women's church

leadership, implying that a glass ceiling is more pervasive in theologically conservative congregations (Fry and Jagger 2024; Longman et al. 2018). This study hypothesizes a negative correlation between theological conservatism and women's church leadership.

H1-2. *Churches with a more conservative theological orientation are less likely to have a woman as their lead pastor.*

1.2 | Glass Cliff

The literature on gender and leadership suggests that organizational circumstances, in terms of an organization's performance and the risks it faces, also affect women's access to leadership positions (Ellemers et al. 2012). The glass cliff theory explains that when women do enter leadership positions, it is most likely when the organization is going through a crisis (Ryan and Haslam 2005). Evidence of a glass cliff has been found in diverse organizational settings: women are more likely to be elected to lead companies in financial crises, lead legal cases where the probability of winning is low, and represent public art events with declining attendance (Smith 2015). Scholars provide several explanations about why the glass cliff phenomenon exists. First, financial stresses or environmental threats prompt an organization to question the status quo and facilitate risk-taking behaviors, which in turn may open leadership opportunities that were previously unavailable to women (Ryan et al. 2016). Scholars also explain that a decline in organizational performance changes the perceptions regarding the required competencies of leaders, and this can reduce the existing gender and racial biases and allow more opportunities for occupational minorities (Cook and Glass 2014; Ryan et al. 2016). For instance, the assumed emotional sensitivity, relational style, and interpersonal skills of women tend to be valued more highly, while the association between masculinity and leadership qualities is attenuated under unfavorable conditions.

Lehman's (1981) survey of members of American Baptist Churches indeed shows that churches with a growing membership and budget are more opposed to the idea of having a woman as their lead pastor than those with a declining membership and budget. He explains that having women leading a church with a growing membership and budget is perceived as a drastic deviation from tradition, and it is more likely to be dismissed. However, churches with a declining membership do not have easy access to the strong pool of highly qualified pastoral candidates who are men. Therefore, women with the commensurate qualifications may be considered better alternatives in this situation (Lehman 1981).

Alternatively, the theory of circumscription and compromise also posits that women choose precarious leadership positions because they believe that promotional opportunities may be less available during the time of organizational growth (Gottfredson 1981). Glass and Cook (2020) and Lee (2024a) suggest that women are subject to complex visibility, defined by both their invisibility in leadership context and the hyper scrutiny they face as leaders, and they deliberately pursue high-risk job assignments. In other words, women may view risk as a means of making a visible and

positive impact and earning requisite leadership credentials for career building (Glass and Cook 2020).

Overall, these findings suggest a negative correlation between an organization's growth and women's leadership. As declines in budgets and participants are most often linked, this study also hypothesizes a negative relationship between the growth in a church's participant base and the likelihood of women's congregational leadership.

H2. *Churches with a declining number of participants are more likely to have a woman as their lead pastor.*

1.3 | Bottom-Up Pressure

The literature also suggests that follower demographics shape what is expected from the leader, including the leader's own demographic characteristics and leadership styles (Ehrhart and Klein 2001; Posner 2018). In this sense, the diversity among followers and their expectation for diversity of the leadership creates "bottom-up" pressure for the organization's leadership to represent diverse population groups (Eagly and Chin 2010). The bottom-up pressure for leadership diversity suggests that the increased diversity in a congregation may lead to addressing the stereotypes and biases against traditionally underrepresented groups, including clergywomen, affecting the collective view on these groups.

Of course, how a church leader is selected varies across denominational structures (Chaves 1993; Perl and Chang 2000). In churches with a congregational form of governance, pastors are generally selected by the congregation, often through voting by members (Virkler 2006). In churches whose decision-making lies primarily through a central hierarchy, appointment of pastors to local churches is most often led by a single, senior leader such as a bishop (Brumley 2009; Perl and Chang 2000). There are also churches with a hybrid structure where decision-making authority is shared among laity, clergy, and a central hierarchy. Still, even in denominations with a highly centralized decision-making system, the choice of local church leaders is made with a consideration of the needs and situations of individual congregations (Brumley 2009; Lutz 2007). Therefore, congregational characteristics influence the selection of a church's lead pastor although their impact may vary across denominations.

Regarding women's leadership, what may have the most direct influence on the congregation's view on women as figures of religious authority is its gender composition. Scholars emphasize the role of pressures for "bottom-up" ascription, whereby the demographic characteristics of leaders are matched to those of followers (Elliott and Smith 2001). The concept of bottom-up ascription predicts that women are more likely to hold a leadership position in an organization where women account for a majority. Studies indeed find that women are perceived to be more fitting to leadership positions when followers are predominantly women (Ali et al. 2021). Eagly and Karau (2002) view prejudice toward women's leadership stemming from the following gender stereotypes: (1) Leadership ability is more stereotypical of men than women and (2) leadership behavior

is less desirable in women than men. Research finds that while men are more likely to associate women with subordinate roles rather than leadership roles, women are not only less likely to embrace descriptive gender roles and prescriptive beliefs about how women ought to behave, but they are also more perceptive of existing inequality (García-González et al. 2019; Rudman and Kilianski 2000). Therefore, the bias and prejudice toward women's leadership may be less prevalent in a group where more women are present. Provided that such prejudice is responsible for the underrepresentation of women in top leadership positions, increased presence of women in an organization's membership may contribute to women's congregational leadership.

H3-1. *Churches with a greater percentage of women are more likely to have a woman as their lead pastor.*

In addition to the gender composition of the congregation, its racial composition can also influence the collective view of women as figures of religious authority. The literature suggests that demographic diversity of organizational membership leads to an increased awareness of political correctness and innovation in an organization (Chatman et al. 1998; Cox 1994). Studies also find that racial dynamics tend to be replicated within religious congregations, which affects the stratification and inequalities based on socioeconomic status within the congregation (Edwards et al. 2013; Yancey and Kim 2008). Moreover, scholars explain that the stigma created by prejudice transfers between racism and sexism, having far-reaching consequences beyond the targeted group (Levine-Rasky 2011; Sanchez et al. 2017). Therefore, the strong connection between racial and gender inequalities implies that a heightened awareness of racial biases and stereotypes in a racially diverse group may help the members become aware of gender biases and stereotypes associated with organizational leadership (Lee 2024a; 2024b). In this sense, increased racial diversity within a church can contribute to addressing and reducing gender inequality in leadership and increasing the members' readiness to accept a woman as a lead pastor. This study hypothesizes a positive association between racial diversity in a congregation and the likelihood of women's congregational leadership.

H3-2. *Churches with a greater level of racial diversity are more likely to have a woman as their lead pastor.*

While demographic diversity within an organization can lead to the demand for increased diversity in its leadership, the literature also emphasizes the role of educational attainment in people's perception and preference for leadership diversity. Scholars explain that obtaining education not only contributes to a person's cognitive and intellectual development, but it also shapes an individual's attitudes, values, and beliefs (Du et al. 2021). Research finds that levels of educational attainment are positively correlated with gender-equitable attitudes and perspectives for men as well as women (Bolzendahl and Myers 2004; Kyoore and Sulemana 2019). In particular, the literature suggests that obtaining post-secondary higher education helps an individual embrace gender equality and egalitarian values and reject traditional gender roles (Bolzendahl and Myers 2004; Du et al. 2020). Therefore, the overall level of education in a congregation may relate to the collective awareness of a gender

gap in its leadership and willingness to accept a woman as the lead pastor. This study hypothesizes a positive association between the proportion of people who completed a college degree in a congregation and the likelihood of women's congregational leadership.

H3-3. *Churches with a greater percentage of college graduates are more likely to have a woman as their lead pastor.*

2 | Gender and Clergy Compensation: Selection Versus Low-Balling

This study also examines how clergy's gender is interrelated with their compensation to identify the mechanism behind the gender pay gap in clergy compensation. With the persistent gender gap in pastoral compensation, scholars have examined whether clergy's gender has an impact on their compensation (Chang 1997; Hoegeman 2017; Liautaud 2012; Pattersen 2021). Although the findings are mixed, there is a consensus that a barrier to women's path to leadership exists in a church that offers a higher salary, and therefore in aggregate, this phenomenon illustrates a major reason for the gender gap in compensation (Carroll 2006).

Undoubtedly, clergy compensation is in part determined by the church's financial and human capacities as they are directly linked to the lead clergy's roles and responsibilities (Nelsen and Everett 1976; Trawick and Lile 2007). Even so, the literature on gender and leadership also suggests that women face disparate treatment in terms of pay and other job-related conditions even when they are hired for the same position in the same organization with their male colleagues (Mohan and Ruggiero 2003, 2007). Research suggests that there exist discriminatory pay-setting practices against women, and women are paid below men when controlling for credentials and productivity (Elkinawy and Stater 2011; Mohan and Ruggiero 2003). In other words, women are low-balled on salaries and end up getting paid less than men in the same position (Guenzel and Malmendier 2020; Lee and Won 2014).

If the observed gender pay gap for lead pastors is mostly due to women's limited access to the leadership positions in congregations where clergy compensation is greater, there should be little or no gender difference in compensation when the selection effect is taken into account. On the other hand, if the clergy's gender itself directly affects salary, the gender disparity in compensation will persist even after the selection effect is considered. Research consistently finds that clergywomen's compensation falls below that of clergymen, accounting for education and other credentials (Durso 2017; Nesbitt 2021). For instance, Perl and Chang's (2000) study of ordained women and men in Protestant congregations reports that clergywomen receive lower returns from their educational attainment in denominations requiring an MDiv for ordinations than clergymen. However, little research has empirically examined the mechanism behind the gender pay gap in religious contexts, whether the gap is driven by low-balling as well as selection. Therefore, it is necessary to test whether head clergywomen receive equal pay for equal work or do they receive a smaller paycheck than men even after controlling for congregational characteristics.

H4. *Even after considering the differences in the likelihood of women's congregational leadership based on congregational characteristics, the gender gap in pastor compensation persists.*

3 | Data and Methods

To test the hypotheses, this study analyzes data from the National Study of Congregations' Economic Practices (NSCEP) (Fulton and King 2018). The NSCEP is a nationally representative survey of religious congregations from every state and major religious group. Conducted in 2018, the survey had a response rate of 40%, offering information from 1171 congregations comprising a representative sample of US congregations. Key informants (typically congregational leaders) completed an online survey that asked questions about the congregation's characteristics, activities, and economic practices.

This study focuses on Protestant churches, which account for about 72% (843 out of 1171) of the participating congregations in NSCEP. All Protestant congregations but one (842 in total) had a head/senior clergy person or leader and provided the clergy gender information. However, only 628 congregations provided lead clergy salary information,¹ and 16 of them reported that their clergy received zero compensation. This study also limits its focus on congregations where lead clergy worked full-time, leaving 476 congregations eligible for analysis. When all other variables are included in the equation (those who did not report one of the characteristics used in the equation are excluded from the analysis), the final sample consists of 260 Protestant churches.

When the congregational characteristics that are associated with the likelihood of having a woman as the lead pastor also affect lead clergy compensation, there is an endogeneity issue (Lee and Lee 2021). To account for the endogeneity, this study employs a linear regression with an endogenous binary treatment effect (*etregress* command in STATA). The method allows estimation of an average treatment effect (ATE) and the other parameters of a linear regression model augmented with an endogenous binary treatment variable that is estimated from a probit regression (StataCorp 2024). In sum, the first stage regression of the model is equivalent to the binary probit model for whether a church has a woman as its lead pastor. The second stage linear regression estimates ATEs of congregational and clergy characteristics on clergy compensation, augmented with the binary-treatment variable estimated from the probit model. The inverse Mills ratio calculated in the probit regression is used as the regressor in the second stage regression to provide adjusted estimates of treatment effect on the outcome variable.

3.1 | The Treatment Model

The treatment model is equivalent to the binary probit regression model whose dependent variable is whether a church's lead pastor is a woman (1 if yes and 0 otherwise). The NSCEP respondents were given a choice between two answers of "male" and "female" in identifying their lead pastor's gender. The sample description in Table 1 shows that about one out of ten (11.1%) churches isitem led by a woman. The model includes the following independent

TABLE 1 | Sample description ($N = 260$).

	All churches ($N = 260$)	Churches with a female lead pastor ($n = 29$)	Churches with a male lead pastor ($n =$ 231)	Min	Max
Number of participants	521.97 (1174.79)	218.21 (212.59)	560.10 (1345.88)	18	12,000
Decrease in participants	0.2615 (0.44)	0.48278 (0.51)	0.2338 (0.42)	0	1
Theologically conservative	0.5538 (0.50)	0.2759 (0.45)	0.5887 (0.49)	0	1
Theologically moderate	0.1731 (0.38)	0.2069 (0.41)	0.1688 (0.38)	0	1
Theologically liberal	0.2731 (0.45)	0.5172 (0.51)	0.2424 (0.43)	0	1
Women %	58.13 (6.76)	61.62 (11.53)	57.69 (6.36)	40	90
Racially diverse	0.1731 (0.38)	0.0690 (0.26)	0.1861 (0.39)	0	1
College graduate %	59.09 (23.17)	61.52 (23.65)	58.78 (23.14)	1	100
Multiple pastors	0.5462 (0.50)	0.2759 (0.45)	0.5801 (0.49)	0	1
Church has full-time admin staff	0.5115 (0.5050)	0.4138 (0.50)	0.5238 (0.50)	0	1
Church annual revenue	\$1,064,357 (2,164,308)	\$545,264.20 (956,164.20)	\$1,129,525 (2,264,448)	\$48,000	\$26.3 million
Politically conservative	0.5192 (0.50)	0.3448 (0.4837)	0.5411 (0.50)	0	1
Politically moderate	0.2731 (0.45)	0.3103 (0.4708)	0.2684 (0.44)	0	1
Politically liberal	0.2077 (0.41)	0.3448 (0.4837)	0.1905 (0.39)	0	1
Pastor does not have a BA	0.1692 (0.38)	0 (0)	0.1905 (0.3935)	0	1
Pastor has a BA only	0.6115 (0.49)	0.8276 (0.38)	0.5844 (0.49)	0	1
Pastor has a graduate degree	0.2192 (0.41)	0.1724 (0.38)	0.2251 (0.42)	0	1
Annual compensation	\$82,962.36 (34,582.06)	\$72,126.17 (25,592.83)	\$84,322.75 (34,582.06)	\$10,000	\$232,500

Note: Standard deviation in parentheses.

variables, which may be associated with the likelihood of having a woman as the lead pastor.

number is used because the distribution of values is skewed right.

3.1.1 | Congregation Size

The first independent variable is church size, measured by the number of adults who regularly participated in the religious life of the congregation. Table 1 shows that the mean number of adult participants is 522 (respondents were asked to give their best estimate). In the regression, the natural logarithm of this

3.1.2 | Theological Orientation

This study uses a three-level measure of theological conservatism, consisting of conservative, moderate, and liberal. This measure is from the response to the survey item “Indicate your congregation’s theological orientation.” Two dichotomous variables of moderate and liberal orientations are included in the regression,

with the conservative orientation as the reference category. Churches with a conservative orientation make up more than half of the sample (Table 1).

3.1.3 | Congregational Decline

To measure a church's change in size, this study uses a variable indicating whether there had been a decrease in the number of regular participants from 3 years ago (1 if there had been a decrease and 0 otherwise). Table 1 shows that 26.2% reported a decline in their participant base compared to 3 years earlier.

3.1.4 | Percentage of Women in the Congregation

The percentage of women in the regular participant base is obtained from the response to the question, "Approximately what percent of the regularly participating adults are female?" On average, 58.1% of the adult participants are women.

3.1.5 | Racial Diversity in the Congregation

The racial diversity variable takes the value of 1 if no racial group accounts for 80% or more of the regular participant base and 0 otherwise. The vast majority (82.7%) of the churches had a dominant racial group with 80% or more of the adult participant base consisting of one racial group, confirming the high level of racial homophily in religious congregations in the United States (McClure 2021; Peart 2022)

3.1.6 | Level of Education in the Congregation

This study uses the percentage of college graduates in the congregation as the overall level of education in a church. This value is based on the survey question, "Approximately what percent of the regularly participating adults completed a college degree?" On average, 59.1% of regular participants are college graduates (Table 1).

In addition to these variables, the treatment model includes other church characteristics that may be associated with the gender of its lead pastor. These characteristics include *presence of additional pastor(s)*, *presence of administrative staff*, and *political orientation of the church (conservative, moderate, and liberal)*.

3.2 | The Linear Regression for Compensation

The dependent variable in the compensation regression is the natural logarithm of the lead pastor's total annual compensation. The primary variable of interest in the compensation equation is the endogenous treatment variable, which is estimated from the binary probit regression for whether a church is led by a woman. The compensation equation also includes both congregational characteristics and the lead clergy's educational attainment variables. The congregational characteristics in the model are: *the number of adult participants (in natural logarithm)*, *theological orientation*, *presence of other ministerial staff*, *presence*

of administrative staff, and *the percentage of college graduates*. In addition to the congregational-level variables, the compensation regression includes *the lead clergy's educational attainment*, measured in three levels: without a BA, has a BA, and has a graduate degree. The first category is used as the reference category in the regression. Table 1 shows that 16.9% of pastors do not have a BA, 61.2% have a BA only, and 21.9% have a graduate degree. Comparison of annual compensation of clergymen and clergywomen leading their congregation shows a substantial gender gap. The mean annual compensation of clergymen is \$84,323, whereas clergywomen's mean compensation is \$72,126 (Table 1).ⁱⁱ In other words, lead clergywomen earn about 86% of what lead clergymen make. The regression analysis below will provide a closer look at the gender gap in compensation and examine what may explain this gap.

4 | Results

Table 2 displays the results of the two equations: the linear regression with an endogenous treatment effect (on the left) and the treatment equation (on the right). The results of the treatment equation describe how selected church characteristics are correlated with the likelihood of women's congregational leadership. The regression estimates indicate that the likelihood of having a woman as the lead pastor is inversely related to church size. The negative correlation between church size and women's congregational leadership supports Hypothesis 1-1. Table 2 also shows that women are less likely to lead a church with a conservative theological orientation, which supports Hypothesis 1-2. Hypothesis 2 is supported by the findings as well, as the results in Table 2 indicate that churches experiencing a decline in the regular participant base are more likely to have a woman as the lead pastor. Table 2 then reveals that the percentage of women and racial diversity within a church are not correlated with the likelihood of women's congregational leadership. Therefore, Hypotheses 3-1 and 3-2 are not supported. However, the percentage of college graduates is positively associated with women's congregational leadership, supporting Hypothesis 3-3.

The likelihood-ratio test results ($\text{Prob} > \chi^2 = 0.000$) suggest that the null hypothesis of no correlation between the error terms of the treatment equation and the outcome equation be rejected (StataCorp 2024). The results in Table 2 show that the *athrho* is statistically significant ($p < 0.05$) and negative. A statistically significant *athrho* suggests that the null hypothesis of no endogeneity be rejected (i.e., estimating an ordinary least squares [OLS] is likely to result in a bias due to endogeneity), and a negative *athrho* indicates that congregational characteristics that are positively associated with the likelihood of women's congregational leadership are negatively correlated with clergy compensation.

The results of the linear regression with the endogeneity treatment effect in Table 2 show a positive correlation between the number of regularly participating adults and the lead pastor salary. Specifically, a 1% increase in the number of participants is associated with a 0.45%ⁱⁱⁱ increase in the pastor's annual compensation. Hence, if a church has twice as many participants (100%), the lead pastor's salary increases by 45%. The percentage of college graduates in the congregation is also positively

TABLE 2 | Linear regression with an endogenous binary treatment effect ($N = 260$).

Compensation equation (with endogenous treatment effect)		Treatment equation	
Independent variables	Coefficient	Independent variables	Coefficient
Number of adult participants ^a	0.453*** (0.101)	Number of adult participants ^a	-0.710*** (0.230)
Theologically moderate	0.022 (0.113)	Theologically moderate	0.390 (0.460)
Theologically liberal	-0.013 (0.104)	Theologically liberal	1.535*** (0.437)
Decrease in participants	0.099 (0.063)	Decrease in Participants	0.935*** (0.286)
Multiple pastors	-0.099 (0.086)	Women %	0.036 (0.022)
Full-time administrative staff	-0.095 (0.085)	Racially diverse	-0.632 (0.432)
College graduates %	0.005** (0.002)	College graduates %	0.026*** (0.009)
Pastor has a bachelor's degree	0.071 (0.119)	Multiple Pastors	-0.044 (0.324)
Pastor has a graduate degree	-0.053 (0.140)	Full-time administrative staff	0.264 (0.303)
Female lead pastor ^b	0.336* (0.178)	Politically moderate	-0.148 (0.339)
Constant	5.065 (1.236)	Politically liberal	-0.844* (0.435)
/athrho	-0.712* (0.375)	Constant	3.188 (3.169)
/Insigma	-1.110*** (0.137)		

Note: Wald $\chi^2(10) = 105.80$, Prob $> \chi^2 = 0.000$. Robust standard errors in parentheses.

^aLog-transformed variable.

^bEndogenous treatment variable.

*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

associated with lead pastor salary, with the salary increasing by 0.5% when the percentage of college graduates increases by 1%. However, the clergy's level of education is uncorrelated with their compensation.

The treatment equation is equivalent to the probit regression for whether a church is led by a woman, and the marginal effects after estimating a separate probit regression are presented in Table 3.^{iv} Because the church size variable is log-transformed, the marginal effect indicates that an increase of 1 in the natural logarithm of the size (an increase of 2.71828 in size) is associated with a 5.4% decrease in the probability of having a woman as the lead pastor. For instance, if church A has 27 more adult participants than Church B, assuming all the other conditions of the two churches are the same, church A is 54% less likely to have a woman as

the lead pastor than Church B. Table 3 also shows that churches with a liberal theological orientation are 16.4% more likely to have a woman as the lead pastor. These findings imply that the glass ceiling phenomenon is more pervasive in larger and more theologically conservative churches. The results in Table 3 reveal that churches with a declining participant base are 11.2% more likely to be led by a woman, which supports the glass cliff theory.

What deserves a closer look is that the coefficient of the endogenous variable is positive when the endogeneity in women's congregational leadership is considered. A positive coefficient of this variable indicates that there is a compensation advantage for women when considering the endogeneity of selection- certain congregational characteristics are associated with the likelihood of women's congregational leadership, and they are also corre-

TABLE 3 | Marginal effects after probit regression (whether a church has a female pastor).

Variables	Average marginal effects
Number of adult participants ^a	−0.054*** (0.012)
Theologically moderate	0.034 (0.050)
Theologically liberal	0.164*** (0.052)
Decrease in participants	0.112*** (0.032)
Women %	0.006*** (0.002)
Racially diverse	−0.068 (0.056)
College graduates %	0.002*** (0.001)
Multiple pastors	−0.012 (0.035)
Full-time administrative staff	0.030 (0.031)
Politically moderate	−0.023 (0.050)
Politically liberal	−0.097* (0.056)

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses.

^aLog-transformed variable.

*** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.1$.

lated with pastor salaries. This study cannot test why there may be a compensation advantage for women due to data limitation. Nevertheless, comparing this result (Table 2) with the OLS estimates in Tables 4 and 5 provides important insights into the gender gap in religious leadership. The OLS results in Table 4 show that there is no significant gender gap in clergy compensation when congregational characteristics along with clergy education and gender are included in the model. In contrast, the results of the linear regression with endogeneity in Table 2 indicate an advantage for women when endogeneity is considered (because factors associated with the likelihood of having a woman as the lead pastor are also associated with compensation). The OLS estimates without the church size variable in Table 5, however, reveal that there exists a disadvantage of 13.7% for women when church size is not included in the regression. Overall, the findings suggest that clergy compensation is primarily determined by congregational characteristics, primarily by church size, and the underrepresentation of women in larger churches' leadership is what drives the gender pay gap for Protestant clergy.

5 | Discussion

This study provides an empirical analysis of gender inequality in the Protestant church leadership in the United States, looking

TABLE 4 | OLS regression for clergy compensation.^a

Independent variables	Coefficients
Number of adult participants ^a	0.416*** (0.092)
Theologically moderate	0.031 (0.114)
Theologically liberal	0.083 (0.081)
Decrease in participants	0.150** (0.067)
College graduates %	0.006*** (0.002)
Multiple pastors	−0.078 (0.081)
Full-time administrative staff	−0.088 (0.085)
Female lead pastor	0.036 (0.088)
Pastor has a bachelor's degree	0.051 (0.118)
Pastor has a graduate degree	−0.071 (0.143)
Constant	5.492*** (1.124)

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses.

^aLog-transformed variable. $F(10, 249) = 8.92$. Prob > $F = 0.0000$. R -squared = 0.6111. Root MSE = 0.3268.

*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$

at both representation and compensation. In particular, this study examines how the glass ceiling, glass cliff, and bottom-up pressure theories relate to the gender gap in church leadership and how the barriers to women's congregational leadership are intertwined with the gender disparity in compensation. The findings provide support for both the glass ceiling and glass cliff theories. First, a glass ceiling is more pervasive in churches with a larger participant base, confirming that women have less access to leading bigger congregations. Second, although the finding that women are more likely to lead liberal congregations is relatively unsurprising, our analysis shows that women do not face better prospects in congregations with a moderate theological orientation than in congregations with a conservative orientation. This suggests that the crack in the glass ceiling is limited primarily to churches with a liberal orientation, implying that there is a "tipping point" in the stained glass ceiling effect of theological orientation. Next, the analysis shows that women are more likely to lead a church with a declining participant base, which supports the glass cliff theory. This finding implies that if successful ministerial leadership is in part evaluated by church growth, clergywomen face disadvantages from a precarious starting position in the evaluation. This can further be used against the case for women's leadership and equal pay.

TABLE 5 | OLS regression for clergy compensation^a without the number of regular participants variable.

Independent variables	Coefficients
Theologically moderate	0.001 (0.108)
Theologically liberal	0.157 (0.096)
Decrease in participants	0.218** (0.090)
College graduates %	0.010*** (0.002)
Multiple pastors	0.220*** (0.070)
Full-time administrative staff	0.063 (0.094)
Female lead pastor	-0.137* (0.072)
Pastor has a bachelor's degree	0.068 (0.148)
Pastor has a graduate degree	0.021 (0.207)
Constant	10.271*** (0.262)

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses.

^aLog-transformed variable. $F(9, 250) = 7.61$. Prob > $F = 0.0000$. R -squared = 0.4616. Root MSE = 0.3838.

*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

This study makes a unique contribution to the literature by not only considering the phenomenon of women's leadership in churches but also investigating how the lack of access to the pulpit of large congregations may be linked to the gender gap in pastoral salaries. The findings suggest that while clergywomen may be getting equal pay for equal work, they do not have equal access to the pulpits that come with a higher salary, which confirms what Carroll (2006) suggests. In the NSCEP sample, no Protestant congregation with 1000 or more regular participants has a woman as the lead pastor. Among churches with 500 or more participants, less than 2% are led by women.

6 | Limitations

The findings of this study may not be generalizable because the analysis focused on congregations that had a full-time lead clergy person and reported the lead clergy salary information as well as other congregational characteristics. This might have resulted in a selection bias because certain types of churches are more likely to provide such information than others and because women as congregational leaders are more likely to be unpaid and be hired part-time than men (Purser and O'Brien 2021).^v This study applies the sampling weight in the analysis to address

the bias, yet this does not necessarily eliminate concerns for systematic bias.

Next, it must be acknowledged that employing a linear regression with an endogenous treatment effect alone may not eliminate all concerns about potential endogeneity or other alternative explanations about clergy gender and compensation. Mixed method research involving detailed financial information and qualitative interviews can help better understand how lead clergy gender and compensation are determined.

In addition, in testing the effect of the glass ceiling, glass cliff, and bottom-up pressure on a church's openness for women's leadership, this study uses a set of proxies since direct measures of these concepts are unavailable. Future research should use better measurement of these effects, for example, prevailing beliefs about gender roles in a congregation or congregants' perceptions of the existing glass ceiling. Doing so will allow a more direct test of how the concepts of glass ceiling, glass cliff, and bottom-up pressure are connected to women's congregational leadership.

Further, this study employs a binary gender variable from the NECEP survey, which cannot capture the diversity in gender identities. The literature suggests that the concept of gender consists of multiple facets, and research should account for the complexity of the concept (Lindqvist et al. 2021; Snyder et al. 2022). Using a nonbinary gender measurement will help better understand the implications of gender for church leadership and gender pay disparity.

Lastly, each denomination has a unique selection process for church leaders, and this can affect the openness for women's leadership. However, the denominational differences were not explicitly considered in this study due to a small sample size (260). Future studies should examine the gender gap in church leadership using more details regarding denominational differences. Examining denominational differences and ecclesial structures will also help better assess the compensation gap as some denominations impose a stronger control over minimum and equitable clergy salaries than others (Haney 2008).

7 | Conclusion

The debate over women's authority and the biblical interpretation of women's place in the church continues even as more women are entering seminaries and theological schools to pursue ministerial careers. Scholars argue that the patriarchal view on church leadership among some religious traditions prevents women from serving as lead pastors, defaulting clergywomen's roles to auxiliary leadership positions, especially in large churches (Grenz and Kjesbo 2010; Whitehead 2013). These gender-based barriers to women's access to bigger pulpits may continue to discourage clergywomen from staying in the ministry and considering head clergy roles, which will limit their impact on people's lives.

Of course, shattering the long-lived stained glass ceiling is not a simple task—the patterns of loose coupling between the rhetoric and practice regarding women's congregational leadership continue today, especially among larger churches. However, the positive connection between congregants' educational attain-

ment and women's congregational leadership suggests that the bottom-up pressure from the laity with more egalitarian beliefs may contribute to removing these barriers. In other words, the congregants' collective view on women as equally capable and eligible as men to become their spiritual leaders may be the key to closing the gender disparity in the access to the pulpit. Although people bring their own beliefs and values formed outside the walls of the church to the institutional church itself, congregations can also confront their views on women's leadership and further address gender inequalities within the congregation by providing church members with information on the barriers to women's leadership such as the glass ceiling and glass cliff phenomena (Lyons et al. 2019; Wood 2019). These efforts will help congregants realize the existing stereotypes and bias about women's religious leadership in their church, which in turn can contribute to creating a more gender inclusive culture in the church, opening women's path to the pulpit, and allowing the church to benefit from what women can offer as leaders of religious communities.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Endnotes

¹ The mean number of regular participants was greater for congregations that did not report the clergy compensation (1111) than for congregations that provided their clergy compensation information (533). The difference between the two groups suggests that there could be a potential sample selection bias.

² The 2021 estimate median wage of clergy in the United States is \$57,230 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2021). This estimate is based on the sample consisting of all religions, and the average compensation in the sample is higher.

³ Both the independent and dependent variables are log-transformed.

⁴ The estimates in Table 2 are probit coefficients, not marginal effects.

⁵ In the entire NSCEP sample of 842 Protestant congregations, 90% of head clergymen worked full-time while 82% of head clergywomen did.

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