

**Iron Sharpening Iron
Fifth Anniversary Celebration
October 24, 2024**

We are thrilled to gather with all of you this evening for a very special conversation with Priya Parker, author of *The Art of Gathering: How We Meet and Why it Matters*. I'm particularly delighted by the occasion that brings us together tonight for the first alumnae gathering of Iron Sharpening Iron and to mark a milestone in the life of this program as we celebrate five years.

Before we launch into the conversation with Priya Parker, I'd like to take a few minutes to talk about what brings us together this evening to celebrate the network that we have built together. Because it has everything to do with the reasons *why* we gather.

This gathering tonight has its origin in another gathering. In 2018, a group of leaders gathered here at Princeton Seminary in this very room with a vision and an idea – to build something that we had not yet seen: an executive leadership program specifically for women clergy that takes pastors seriously as leaders, equipping them with a confidence born of competence in the art and science of leading well, with a vision for the flourishing of the whole church.

We gathered because we knew the statistics of lack of gender equality in the church. The most recent National Congregations Survey (2019) indicates that only 14% of congregations in the United States are led by a woman head of staff. And only 8% of congregants in the United States have the experience of attending a congregation led by a woman head of staff.¹

That's a problem for the church and for society. The leadership of women clergy has been linked to higher levels of trust and engagement in congregations, but it also has a powerful influence beyond the church. A recent study of women's ordination in America by Cammie Bolin and Benjamin Knoll, published by Oxford University Press, found that having an influential female religious leader in one's youth has lasting impact on levels of self-esteem, self-efficacy, and education, which in turn are linked to levels of employment, income, and leadership in adulthood.² They found that women who reported being influenced by a woman religious leader in their youth are, as today's adults, productively employed at rates equal to men. The evidence of this research suggests that "gender equality in religious congregational leadership is a necessary precondition for gender equality in American society at large."³

¹ See <https://www.nationalcongregationsstudy.org>. Similar trends prevail in other professions. Women have been entering the professional and managerial ranks of American corporations at the same rate as men for at least the past twenty-five years. Yet in 2018 [women comprised only 4.8% of Fortune 500 CEOs](#). Globally, women make up just 25% of senior managers and 15% of corporate board members. There are comparable levels of under-representation of women in leadership around the world in government, law and the media: 23% of national parliamentarians, 27% of judges, and 26% of news media leaders, according to the [The Global Institute for Women's Leadership](#), King's College London. Similar trends prevail in higher education, where only 26% of college presidents in the United States are women (see Bryan J. Cook, "The American College President Survey: Key Findings and Takeaways," *Spring Supplement 2012*, <http://www.acenet.edu/the-presidency/columns-and-features/Pages/The-American-College-President-Study.aspx>.)

² See Benjamin R. Knoll and Cammie Jo Bolin, *She Preached the Word: Women's Ordination in Modern America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

³ *Ibid.*, 204.

We gathered that day – we gather today – because we know that the leadership of gifted women is vital for the flourishing of the church and the world. We gathered that day in 2018 to dream together. That gathering included some of the people who are here tonight – Sarah Butter, Laurie Ferguson, Pam Driesell, Dayle Rounds – and the Holy Spirit, she was there too. That gathering led to a grant proposal and a major gift from the Lilly Endowment for the launch of Iron Sharpening Iron.

This is what happens when we gather.

Soon others joined us – Lois Annich and Shelley Smith joined as coaches. Cathy Gilliard joined as pastor in residence. Thais Carter joined as *Thais Carter*. And then, class by class, and year by year, all of you joined us to build together something far more powerful than any one of us could accomplish alone. Five years later, more than 120 women have been through the Iron Sharpening Iron program and are now part of this network.

The energy of all of you dynamic, faithful, vibrant leaders when we gather is electric. I want you to look around tonight and see what you have been part of creating. This is the *power* of gathering. As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another. That is why we gather.

No one tells the story of this impact better than Gary Vazquez, an ISI graduate from 2022, who had one of those powerful experiences at her first ISI seminar. I invite you to [listen to her story](#).

Gary is the first female presbyter elected in her denomination. She was encouraged to follow that call and raise her hand to lead because of her experience in this program. This is why we gather.

And it's not only about you as individuals, but all of the people that your leadership impacts.

I hear a lot these days about clergy burnout as a major threat to pastoral ministry and the cause of many gifted pastors leaving the profession. But that is not the story I hear from Iron Sharpening Iron graduates.

You are equipped, empowered, inspired, engaged to lead. And, in turn, you are equipping, inspiring, engaging, and empowering others. And that has an exponential impact in the world.

When you lead, in your beautiful way, people flourish. Congregations flourish. Communities flourish. This is why we gather.

The purpose of our gathering is not for ourselves alone, but for the work that God calls us to do in the world. You are doing that faithful work, and it is inspiring. There is a hope and *hopefulness* in the power of your collective leadership and faith that I believe has a leavening influence in the world. As Cathy Gilliard, one of our pastors in residence, says [the Church needs programs like this](#).

I will close with one more story of Iron Sharpening Iron in the words of Shelly Satran, an ISI graduate from 2022. I invite you to [listen to her story](#). As Shelly says, “We can do this.” We are doing this. You are doing this.

This is why we gather. Thank you for your role in what we are building together. And we are only just getting started.

The impact of this program tells us that advancing the leadership of women clergy is one of the most productive investments we can make in advancing the flourishing of the church and of society as a whole. Our world urgently needs the leadership of all of those whom God has called and gifted for the work of ministry.

Together, let’s continue with the work we have begun. Because when you lead – when *we* lead – people flourish. Thanks be to God!

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