



minister

MAGAZINE

A Journal of the American Baptist Ministers Council • Speaking to the Practice of Ministry

Volume XXXII, No. 3

Published Periodically at Valley Forge, PA

Fall, 2009



Our Sense of Call

GENDER ISSUES IN MINISTRY

Heather Entrekin



It happened almost three decades ago in a downtown Chicago church I loved for its creative, inclusive, progressive congregation. One summer Sunday a guest preacher stepped up to the pulpit. The preacher was a woman. Although I was pushing 30 and a lifelong American Baptist, she was the first clergywoman I had ever seen in the pulpit. The sermon was excellent, but the best part was a profound sense of connection and belonging that, until that moment, I had not realized I lacked.

Following the service, I shared this epiphany with my 20-something friends. One of the men in the group instantly quoted a few Pauline texts to support his opposition to women in the pulpit. He triumphantly declared that he had almost walked out of the service in protest.

I knew that my experience was holy and real but I could not articulate or defend it. Out of frustration, stubbornness and hope, I enrolled in seminary, expecting to gain a few proof-texting skills of my own for the next attack. Instead, to the amazement of self and others, I began a slow but steady journey toward pastoral ministry.

Stories and statistics indicate that issues manifested in the circumstances of my call continue to reverberate in the church. Navigating the obstacles to call and ordination is difficult enough, but once ordained, women continue to face resistance. It comes in congregations of all denominations, sizes and locales. While mainline Protestant denominations have ordained women for decades and many have taken pride in recent prominent leadership roles for ordained female clergy, conservatives continue to argue that the pulpit is not an appropriate place for us.¹

We are clearly taking steps forward with increasing numbers of women enrolled in seminary, seeking ordination and serving churches in some denominations, but this is still an uphill calling.

The challenge begins with a dearth of models and mentors. Even a denomination as historically and structurally open to women as the United Methodists has only 18.5% clergywomen. Most girls do not encounter women clergy and those who do may find them struggling. Research of American Baptist women clergy reveals that compensation is demonstrably lower than for male colleagues, the ordination process more difficult and pastoral placement more challenging.²

The gender distinctions that make it difficult to hear a call and respond to it also raise obstacles once we do. A shortage of female peers in ministry exacerbates the loneliness that is an occupational hazard for anyone in ministry. Self-doubt is heightened by the negativity of others. Comments in the receiving line after worship like, “That wasn’t as bad as I expected” or “I forgive you for preaching,” have an annoying, residual capacity for undermining energy and confidence.

Sometimes the difficulty comes from women parishioners uncomfortable with other women in an unfamiliar role. Women clergy may be seen as a threat to traditional hierarchical family relationships. One colleague sees this as a particular problem for African American clergywomen. She recalls being confronted by a member of the congregation who said with more candor than most, "I don't want a woman to have authority over my husband!"

Prejudice against women is sometimes overt, but the covert variety is equally insidious. One woman holding a high denominational office described the pain of simply being ignored by male colleagues in regional meetings. Another colleague, competent and experienced, confessed a sense of dislocation and conspicuousness when she walked into a room filled with clergymen only. Many of us have had the unsettling experience of tokenism when even supportive male colleagues turn to the lone female in the room and ask, "What do women think about that?"

Women often major in spiritual gifts of compassion, encouragement, humility, gratitude and hospitality. We may naturally embrace and practice a healthy theology of servant leadership. While these are good and necessary strengths in ministry, when women clergy display them they may feed age-old stereotypes that obstruct recognition and acceptance of other qualities and roles a pastor must assume. A congregation is likely to affirm a clergywoman's nurturing and pastoral care ministry but disdain her authoritative voice before the finance board or in the midst of conflict or problem-solving.

Passive or aggressive opposition to women in ministry feeds self-doubt and hesitance to claim strengths and power. Women become more than willing to emphasize and apologize for inabilities. Conversely, we may refuse to use and honor the skills and abilities we do have or seek to learn them. As a child, I was convinced that I could not do well in math because this was the consistent lament of my mother. Despite high grades in math courses all the way to graduate level statistics, the perception of inability persists. Likewise a culture of hostility, skepticism or indifference toward female pastors promotes deep insecurity about genuine abilities.

Women may also harbor a prejudice against traditional male models and metaphors that do not serve us well in ministry. I think of a leadership training program in which the opening Super Bowl clip on the giant screen closed my mind to the possibility of any learning. It didn't help that I was already feeling alienated as one of only two women among 100 clergy in the room, but I was quick to take offense at the excessively macho theme and dismiss the curriculum out of hand. Flying mud and crashing helmets will never be my idea of an inspiring leadership model, but hierarchy, coaching and team work do have something to offer leadership in ministry. Masculine and feminine models of leadership both

bring strengths to the table.

I have argued that gender issues are real and harmful to faithful, effective ministry. But they may also help. It was, after all, opposition to a woman preacher that triggered my decision to enter seminary. Opposition may also strengthen us along the way. It happened for one clergywoman after hearing this comment following a sermon: "I'm against women in ministry, but don't take it personally." She described that as some of the best advice she ever received because it prompted awareness and development of the essential ministry skill of self-differentiation. Concern about persistent barriers for women in ministry positions is prompting seminaries, denominations and foundations to seek new ways to prepare and sustain women for ecclesial leadership with promise for broadening and strengthening theological education and the church overall.

Despite persistent human obstacles to women in ministry, God continues to open doors to ministry and women continue to walk through them. As one clergywoman wrote out of painful experience, "You can continue your relentless efforts to contain the spirit of God, squelch it, silence it and damage it, but it will not die in us. I pray that we will have the courage to follow our Lord into a kingdom where enemies are loved, where sons and daughters prophesy, even behind pulpits, and where God's Spirit is poured out on all flesh." (Rev. Nancy Hastings Sehested, from *An Open Letter to the Home Mission Board*, Southern Baptist Convention, 1989)

God helping us, may it be so.

¹ "Women Clergy: Steps Forward and Back," *Christian Century*, October 31, 2006

² Study by James Owen Wolfe III, "American Baptist Women in Pastoral Ministry: A Contemporary Survey." Cloverdale Books, 2007.

Heather Entrekin has served as Senior Pastor at Prairie Baptist Church in Prairie Village, Kansas since 1999. She is a daughter and great granddaughter of Baptist pastors. Contact her at entrekin@prairiebaptist.org





minister

MAGAZINE

Published periodically as a forum for issues and events that pertain to ministry as observed and practiced by ministerial leaders of the American Baptist Churches USA

Editor: Michael Saylor

Publisher: Joe Kutter

Ministers Council Communications Committee

Contact:

The Ministers Council
PO Box 851
Valley Forge, PA 19482-0851

Phone: 1 • 800 • 222-3872 ext 2333, 2334
Fax: 610 • 768-2066

ministers council membership

You are eligible for membership if you are either

- ordained
- commissioned • a lay professional or
- a student in seminary
- eligible for inclusion in the

Directory of Professional Church Leaders of the American Baptist Churches USA and serving an American Baptist Church or auxilliary organization

- paying dues through a constituent council or to the National Office of the Ministers Council

Join the Ministers Council through your local constituent council. Contact information is posted on the web at www.ministerscouncil.org under the "Who We Are" link.

mission

The Ministers Council is the professional association of ministerial leaders within the American Baptist Churches USA. We are working together to:

- Connect colleagues through Together in Ministry groups and Communities of Practice
- Establish and maintain professional and ethical standards of the Christian ministry
- Give support to the members of this body and be an advocate for them in their professional relations
- Resource ministry through our web site at www.ministerscouncil.org
- Interpret the appropriate roles of professional ministerial leadership to the constituent parts of our denomination, and to our local American Baptist Churches
- Encourage the recruitment and nurture of candidates for the various church vocations
- Provide a means of expression and debate by members of this body on issues that affect the professional ministerial leadership of the American Baptist Churches USA
- Cooperate with the appropriate units of the American Baptist Churches USA in matters of mutual interest and concern, including recruitment, placement, compensation, continuing education, and counseling

