



minister

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'Tsk-Tsk' is Not Enough:

Engaging a conversation about personal and public support of colleagues in ministry who are women.

Cheryl Dudley

Ministry can do a number on all of us in many ways. Yet when gender discrimination happens in ministry it can be devastatingly discouraging, or incrementally erode the spirit, hope and confidence of those seeking to be faithful to God. Many women entered the hallowed halls of theological schools with earnest expectations. Not with the expectation that this thing we had embarked upon was going to happen seamlessly, but that we would have a real opportunity to do ministry. We

wanted to believe that doors would open without us having to knock too hard, and that “God would always make a way out of no way” without us becoming overly bruised and battered.

Even the most tenacious and seeking-to-be-so-faithful among us can experience a cruelly felt sense of abandonment when we encounter consistent obstructions to the practice of ministry. Some experience it for the first time early on. Others don't experience it until much later, perhaps in the pursuit of the penultimate call. Most of us experience it both early and late. Yes, you have to be strong in many ways to endure the stumbling blocks to ministry; they are real.

I was a “preacher's kid,” so in some ways romantic notions of living out my call without hitches were tempered by what I knew to be the real deal. At the center of this was my relationship with God, which was an interesting, complex, whole self, love relationship. Because of this relationship, a response to a call to ministry is something that I, along with others, couldn't stop. If we could have, at least in our imaginations stimulated by the bad days, we might have chosen another, and in our minds easier, path. That path might not have been rich in the things of the Spirit, but would have been richer in material goods, more conducive to personal or family life, less tedious and demanding, and would have had a time sheet that was honored. But alas, once you fall in love with God, you can't help but follow your heart. This is something that women do well. We have chosen a peculiar path for we too are a part of a “peculiar people.”¹

I graduated from seminary in 1983. A year and a half later I was ordained to the ministry at my home church in Phoenix, Arizona. I had the “peculiarity” of being the first woman of any racial identity to be ordained in the American Baptist tradition in Arizona. Even at the tender age of 25, being a pioneer was not a new role for me. When I was growing up my family was the first African American family in our neighborhood; my sisters and I were the first black children to attend our elementary school, and the list goes on. By the time I was ordained, being the first was old news and not a trophy I desired.

Although I had somehow developed an aptitude for trying to blend in while sticking out like a sore thumb, it created a kind of loneliness that, while familiar, was nonetheless undesirable. I learned to suppress my loneliness as well as any hope of finding collegial support or friendship, and on the other hand of being championed by those in ministry who were positioned to do so effectively. I am not even sure that I had any expectation deep within me that personal or public support would be palpably experienced, even among our particular kind of liberal Baptists.

My call to national staff some years later meant that I would no longer be a stranger,² the first and the only of my ethnic and gender identity, as well as the only clergy present. I accepted that call with a great sense of relief and hope for belonging.

How does discrimination in ministry manifest itself? Sometimes it comes in blatant and explicit forms. More often it appears in subtler ways, experienced through unsupportive attitudes, petty and uncooperative behaviors that intermittently surface from both men and women, or among colleagues or superiors beside whom we minister. Frequently these are present throughout the duration of our careers.

The overt forms of discrimination are easy to spot. They present themselves through direct statements, like “I don’t believe in women ministers!” That’s clear. These statements are often backed up by a few over- or inappropriately-used passages of scripture. There are also not-so-subtle forms of discrimination expressed in questions like, “How would your husband feel about you doing this?” Or, “Who is the head of your household?” Or, “What will you do if you have children?”

Discrimination is also experienced through exclamations of doubt that search committees would ever consider a woman, or by the refusal of those committees even to receive the names of women into their pool of candidates. In effect they say, “Tsk-Tsk;” in other words, “It is such a pity, and there is not much I can do about it.” Through my years in ministry I have heard these words too often from those who provide resources to local church search committees.

At least monthly I share dinner with a couple of friends who are also women in ministry but serve in Christian traditions other than my own. One of them regularly laments that in the 10 plus years since she has been ordained she has yet to be called into a permanent and salaried position in ministry. I grieve with her in this; she has wonderful gifts. I would have guessed that her church tradition would be further along than ours. I believe, as another friend earnestly stated, that God will make room for her gifts, but sometimes it seems slow in coming.

I recently posed to these friends the question of how collegial support happens in times of discrimination. Their eyes revealed a glimpse of their souls as they thoughtfully considered it. They responded poignantly, recalling times when persons of influence had seemingly chosen to neither publicly nor privately stand against the discrimination of women in ministry. In their examples they recalled times when persons with status could easily have advocated for women (or just one woman they knew was gifted for ministry), but had chosen not to.

I understand why individuals who are young might not advocate for women. Women have raised the bar for ministry. My friends and I speculated that some of these younger colleagues or peers might be insecure, competitive, self-centered, egotistical, or just have bad theology. Additionally, male juniors often do not have the same spiritual, social or political capital that their elders possess and wouldn’t necessarily feel as effective in the role of advocate. However, these seem like excuses, not reasons.

Despite what I indicated earlier in this article, I am gratefully able to admit that I have had opportunities in ministry that many others of either gender have not. Some have presented themselves; in other instances I have offered myself for consideration for plum roles. I have gone to extraordinary places and have had grace-filled conversations with people who were considered important. In so doing, I have also gone to unfamiliar places, which at the time I often considered undesirable. Yet in those places I found friends and God. Being a single woman in ministry, I have had the freedom to travel, relocate, and get up and go where many who had the blessings and obligations of spouse and family could not go as easily.

As I write these words I am conscious of my own obligations to be personally and publically supportive of those who face discrimination. As a former chief affirmative action officer within ABCUSA, I know from experience that institutional changes don’t usually happen on their own. I have the scars to prove it. Sometimes individuals and systems often and truly “don’t get it.”

Yet teaching and empowering moments present themselves every day. Intentionality toward becoming the beloved community, at least in this area, is an opportunity organizations can exercise. Toward that, I am creating my own fresh list of what I can and am reasonably equipped to do. I do so knowing that to say at this point in history, “Tsk-Tsk, isn’t it a shame that so many gifted women aren’t living out their gifts in ministry?” is a mealy-mouthed excuse. Won’t you join me in creating your own list and live it out in faithfulness to the ministry to which God has called each of us? What might be on your list?

Women’s exuberance for the Gospel is clear; scripture bears witness to this from the conception of Jesus, his death and resurrection, every point in between, and into the current age. Many women’s natural affinities, willingness, and wonderful gifts are of inestimable worth for ministry. This value is referenced by Paul in his greetings to and affirmations of female leaders in his epistles to the early church.³ It is also voiced by early teacher⁴ who spoke similarly or evoked feminine imagery in reference to the church and its leadership.⁵ Women have participated in and have been recognized for ministry since the earliest ages of the Christian faith. It should not stop. We live in

a wonder-filled, complex, fragile world that is yearning for the hope that the gospel of Christ provides.. Both women and men in ministry help make it possible for people to connect to the mysteries of God.

So, let us work for and live together into the transformation that our faith promises. Living aloud our theological clarity about women's participation in Christ's ministry is something that can be on all our respective lists. It is a call at times to bear the cross and at other times to celebrate the hope and mystery of Christ.

The Covenant and Code reminds us with the following:

*I will show my personal love for God as revealed in Jesus Christ in my life and ministry, as I strive together with my colleagues to preserve the dignity, maintain the discipline and promote the integrity of the vocation to which we have been called.*⁶ "Since we have such a hope, we act with great boldness..."⁷ "The harvest is plenty and the laborers are few."⁸

Let's see what we can do together.

Notes

¹ I Peter 2:0

² Ephesians 2:19

³ Romans 16: 1-15; Galatians 3: 28-29; Philippians 4:2-3
Colossians 4: 15; all texts NRSV unless otherwise noted.; 2
Tim 1:5

⁴ Hebrews 3:1

⁵ 2 John

⁶ The Covenant of Code of Ethics for Ministerial Leaders
in American Baptist Churches

⁷ 2 Corinthians 3:12

⁸ Luke 10:2; Matt 9:37-38

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The Ministers Council Provides a Community for its Members:

- To assume responsibility for the faithful practice of the ministerial calling;
- To develop and promote ethical standards that both guide and shape the way in which the vocation of ministry is performed;
- To assume personal responsibility for and to encourage physical and emotional well-being in the practice of ministry;
- To inform, support and encourage one another in the deepening of personal and communal spiritual life;
- To work together to develop the skills necessary to become effective servants of Christ's church
- To encourage growing friendships that inform and correct the leader as she or he seeks to faithfully respond to the call of God in Christ Jesus.

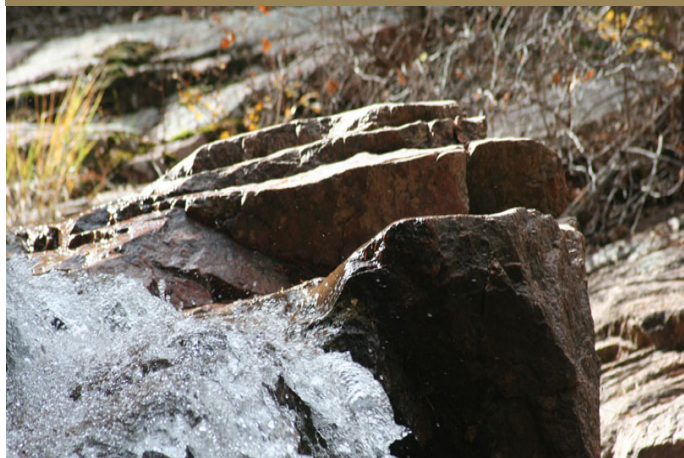


Photo Credit: Michael Saylor

The Ministers Council is that Unique Place within the National Structure of the ABCUSA which:

- Offers leaders opportunities to articulate a distinct ministerial viewpoint, among the many denominational perspectives that need to be voiced and heard, as we work together for the growth of Christ's kingdom;
- Serves as an advocate for its members in times of difficulty and conflict;
- Is solely focused on the well-being of clergy as they engage in the ministerial calling in all of its dimensions.

www.ministerscouncil.org

THE COVENANT AND CODE OF ETHICS

for Ministerial Leaders of American Baptist Churches

Having accepted God's call to leadership in Christ's Church, I covenant with God to serve Christ and the Church with, the help of the holy spirit, to deepen my obedience to the Two Great Commandments: to love the Lord our God with all my heart, soul, mind and strength, and to love my neighbor as myself.

In affirmation of this commitment, I will abide by the Code of Ethics of the Ministers Council of the American Baptist Churches and I will faithfully support its purposes and ideals. As further affirmation of my commitment, I covenant with my colleagues in ministry that we will hold one another accountable for fulfillment of all the public actions set forth in our Code of Ethics.

I will hold in trust the traditions and practices of our American Baptist Churches; I will not accept a position in the American Baptist family unless I am in accord with those traditions and practices; nor will I use my influence to alienate my congregation/constituents or any part thereof from its relationship and support of the denomination. If my convictions change, I will resign my position.

I will respect and recognize the variety of calls to ministry among my American Baptist colleagues, and other Christians.

I will seek to support all colleagues in ministry by building constructive relationships wherever I serve, both with the staff where I work and with colleagues in neighboring churches.

I will advocate adequate compensation for my profession. I will help lay persons and colleagues to understand that ministerial leaders should not expect or require fees for pastoral services from constituents they serve, when these constituents are helping pay their salaries.

I will not seek personal favors or discounts on the basis of my ministerial status.

I will maintain a disciplined ministry in such ways as keeping hours of prayers and devotion, endeavoring to maintain wholesome family relationships, sexual integrity, financial responsibility, regularly engaging in educational and recreational activities for ministerial and personal development. I will seek to maintain good health habits.

I will recognize my primary obligation to the church or employing group to which I have been called, and will accept added responsibilities only if they do not interfere with the overall effectiveness of my ministry.

I will personally and publicly support my colleagues who experience discrimination on the basis of gender, race, ethnicity, age, marital status, national origin, physical impairment or disability.

I will not proselytize from other Christian churches.

I will, upon my resignation or retirement, sever my ministerial leadership relations with my former constituents, and will not make ministerial contacts in the field of another ministerial leader without his/her request and/or consent.

I will hold in confidence and treat as confidential communication any information provided to me with the expectation of privacy. I will not disclose such information in private or public except when, in my practice of ministry, I am convinced that the sanctity of confidentiality is outweighed by my well-founded belief that life-threatening or substantial harm will be caused.

I will not use my ministerial status, position or authority knowingly to abuse, misguide, negatively influence, manipulate, or take advantage of anyone, especially children.

I will report all instances of abuse as required by law to the appropriate agency. In any case involving persons working in ABC ministry, I will also report the circumstances to the appropriate regional and/or national denominational representative.

I will show my personal love for God as revealed in Jesus Christ in my life and ministry, as I strive together with my colleagues to preserve the dignity, maintain the discipline and promote the integrity of the vocation to which we have been called.



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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

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.



Photo Credit: Michael Saylor