

In historic move, First Baptist Decatur calls Waco woman as senior pastor

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By Hannah Elliott

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DECATUR, Ga. (ABP)—First Baptist Church of Decatur, Ga., has become the largest church associated with the Southern Baptist Convention or the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship to hire a woman as senior pastor.

In a closed business session after Sunday morning worship June 17, nearly 400 members voted to call Julie Pennington-Russell as minister. The proposal, approved by a show of hands, went unchallenged in a discussion session.

Julie Pennington- Russell

Pennington-Russell, 46, currently is senior pastor of Calvary Baptist Church in Waco, a post she has held since 1998. She had previously worked as a pastor at Nineteenth Avenue Baptist Church in San Francisco. She will begin her new job Aug. 19, succeeding Gary Parker, who resigned.

The church, with 2,700 members, is one of several historic congregations in Decatur, which now is surrounded by metropolitan Atlanta.

“The thought of coming alongside this remarkable congregation in this world-class city at this moment in history fills me with a huge joy,” Pennington-Russell said. “Our family is eager to hoist our sail with this great community of Christ-followers.”

In a statement to the Decatur church about Pennington-Russell, search committee members said they spent 800 hours considering 64 candidates for the position. The committee also consulted an outside panel of six people “knowledgeable in Baptist life today.”

“At the end of the process, however, our selection was unanimous. Every member of the committee expressed the conviction that the Holy Spirit has indeed led us to our final selection,” the statement said. “We truly believe that (Pennington-Russell) embodies all of the qualities you asked us to find in a pastor, and we are convinced that, like us, you will learn to love her and admire her for her depth, her joyous Christian spirit, and her dedication to the gospel message.”

While the SBC doctrinal statement, the 2000 Baptist Faith & Message, states that “the office of pastor is limited to men as qualified by Scripture,” a recent study by Baptist Women in Ministry identified female senior pastors in 117 congregations currently or previously affiliated with the SBC. More than 1,800 women have been ordained to serve in various ministry roles, the study reported.

Pennington-Russell graduated from the University of Central Florida in Orlando and Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary in Mill Valley, Calif. She is completing a doctor of ministry degree at Baylor University’s Truett Theological Seminary. Pennington-Russell and her husband, Tim, have two children.

First Baptist Church of Decatur, with a history reaching back to the Civil War, was founded as a Southern Baptist church. According to the church's website, however, 80 percent of its members now designate their denominational support to the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, and roughly 20 percent support the SBC. In 2006, the church reported an average Sunday school attendance of roughly 450 people.

Al Mohler, president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and an opponent of women as pastors, agreed Pennington-Russell's selection precedent-setting. For a church with the history and prominence of First Baptist Decatur to call a woman as senior minister is "undeniably historic," he said in a June 5 post on www.conventionalthinking.net.

"This move increases the visible distance between the Southern Baptist Convention and the constellation of moderate Baptist organizations disaffected from the denomination. The distance is theological, cultural, ideological—and growing," Mohler wrote.