

Baptist church in Washington calls lesbian couple as pastors

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WASHINGTON—Calvary Baptist Church, a 155-year-old congregation in the heart of downtown Washington, D.C., named a same-sex married couple as co-pastors.



Co-pastors Maria Swearingen (left) and Sally Sarratt stand in front of the Burrall windows in the Palacios Chapel of Calvary Baptist Church in Washington, D.C. (Photo courtesy of Sandra Auman via Calvary Baptist Church) The congregation approved Sally Sarratt and Maria Swearingen for the senior leadership posts during worship services Jan. 8. They are scheduled to begin their new jobs Feb. 26.

“We look for the best people in the world, and that’s who they were,” said Carol Blythe, chair of the congregation’s ministerial search committee. “We’re very excited.”

Call for 'serious dialogue'

However, the church's decision prompted a fellow pastor in the District of Columbia Baptist Convention to call for "serious dialogue and prayerful discussion" between convention leaders and the congregation.

Joseph Lyles, pastor of Fort Foote Baptist Church in Fort Washington, Md., and former president of the National African American Fellowship of the Southern Baptist Convention, said he was "surprised" and "concerned" by Calvary Baptist's decision to call a same-sex couple as pastors.

"I would hope that lines would be drawn" regarding cooperation with the Baptist convention, he said.

"My loving, compassionate side would not (want to disfellowship) them from the convention," Lyles said. "Hopefully, they will come around and see the biblical light."

No plans to disassociate

Robert Cochran, executive director of the District of Columbia Baptist Convention, issued a statement regarding the convention's position.

"We have no plans to disassociate" with Calvary, he said. "To the best of my knowledge, the D.C. Baptist Convention, due to its respect for local congregational autonomy, has never withdrawn fellowship from any congregation."

Cochran said he is "certain that homosexuality has been discussed" at some point since the founding of Calvary in 1861 and the convention in 1877. However, he added, "I can state with certainty that I have never discussed the issue of homosexuality with leaders at Calvary."

Broke with Southern Baptists in 2012

Calvary Baptist severed ties with the SBC in 2012. It found itself at loggerheads with the group on several issues, including the convention's stance against homosexual behavior. Calvary Baptist still affiliates with American Baptist Churches USA, the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and the Alliance of Baptists.

Sarratt and Swearingen come to Calvary from Greenville, S.C., where Sarratt is associate chaplain for behavioral health in the Greenville Health System and Swearingen is associate chaplain at Furman University. Sarratt also has served as part-time associate minister at Greenville Unitarian Universalist Fellowship.

"We have found it so easy to fall in love with Calvary and its longstanding commitment to be a voice of justice and compassion for those who perpetually find the wholeness of their humanity disregarded and maligned," the couple stated in an announcement from the church.

The women met in First Baptist Church of Greenville, and both were ordained by that congregation after it adopted and implemented a nondiscrimination policy in 2015.

Sarratt left the corporate world after she felt called to ministry and obtained a master's degree in theological studies from Emory University.

Swearingen, who is fluent in English and Spanish, earned a master of divinity degree from Duke Divinity School, where she won an award for her preaching.

Amy Butler, Calvary's previous senior minister, left to become pastor of New York's Riverside Church in 2014.

Compiled from reports by Lauren Markoe of Religion News Service and David Roach of Baptist Press

