

Chinese fellowship board addresses pastoral title

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MONTEREY PARK, Calif. (BP)—The title “pastor” is used for women in Chinese Southern Baptist churches because of language, history and culture, but it does not indicate churchwide authority, the board of the Chinese Baptist Fellowship of the USA and Canada stated.

Rather, the title of “Reverend” is used to denote authority in the Chinese Southern Baptist church, is given through ordination and is limited to men, the fellowship’s board of directors said in its Nov. 3 statement, “[Women in Ministry: Roles and Titles in Chinese Baptist Churches.](#)”

The group released the statement to inform Southern Baptists of the unique circumstances Chinese Southern Baptists face in using the title of pastor, and in light of messengers’ votes at the 2023 SBC annual meeting signaling the title be limited to men, CBFUSA Senior Liaison Amos Lee told Baptist Press.

“We feel the need to clarify the unique situation in Chinese Baptist churches, most of which are affiliated with Southern Baptists, regarding the designation we use for ministers who serve in our churches to avoid misunderstanding of where we stand in light of the issue of ‘women pastors’ debated at the 2023 SBC,” Lee said.

“It is also important because we want those in the leadership of the SBC to consider and be aware of the diversity we have within the larger family of Southern Baptists whose practices and nuances that are unique to our communities because of history and culture, especially in language which is somehow ‘lost in translation.’”

Joseph Huang, president of the Chinese Baptist Fellowship of Texas, noted the board of the national Chinese fellowship “did not host a national conference with other Chinese pastors in different states to discuss or vote for approving a common statement on this specific issue.”

In fact, Huang, the Chinese mission pastor at First Baptist Church in Belton, was unaware the board had issued a statement until the *Baptist Standard* contacted him seeking his response to it.

He noted Chinese Baptist churches in Texas affiliated with the Baptist General Convention of Texas “still stress the autonomy of the local churches and stand on the common ground of the 1963 Baptist Faith & Message.”

Unlike the 2000 Baptist Faith & Message, the 1963 statement of faith does not explicitly limit the pastoral role to men or speak to the matter of “male headship” in the family or the church.

Varied titles have historic roots

Women hold the titles of pastor, minister, evangelist, teacher and “Bible women” in Chinese Southern Baptist churches today, according to the official statement from the national fellowship board, based on at least five Chinese words and their English translations.

Additionally, because the fellowship recently adopted the title of pastor for non-ordained ministers, the Chinese word for minister is also translated as pastor.

“The practice is not over fidelity or obedience to Scripture but rather due to history and language,” the statement reads. “In addition, the Baptist principle regarding autonomy of the local churches allows for individual churches to practice male headship/leadership in their local context based

on history and language.”

Women have been vital in Chinese church ministry for generations, the statement reads, because many of the first converts in China were women who were influential in evangelism and church planting “similar to Lydia in Philippi.”

“Due to persecution and a lack of mature male leaders, women played a pivotal role in evangelism, teaching, and discipleship” historically, according to the statement.

“This still takes place today within the Chinese church in China and among the Chinese diaspora including North America, with women having shepherding roles and caring responsibilities for women’s, children and youth, administrative, and other ministries under the male leadership of a senior pastor.”

Several Chinese Southern Baptist churches use the title of pastor for various women in ministry, Lee said, but an exact number was not available. Dropping the use of the word pastor would be culturally cumbersome for Chinese speaking congregations, but the CBFUSA leaves each congregation free to make its own decisions regarding the term.

“For us, the word translated as ‘pastor’ in English best describes our understanding of the role servants of God play in the church. They are the shepherds of God’s church in whatever aspects of the role they play,” Lee told Baptist Press.

“We will not dictate to churches what they need to do and will leave it up to them to make the changes, but we do not see any word in English that best describes the role they have historically, theologically and semantically.”

The CBFUSA is the second Southern Baptist ethnic fellowship to release a statement on women’s roles and titles in ministry, following [a letter](#) July 3

from the [National African American Fellowship of the SBC](#).

Pete Ramirez, executive director of the California Southern Baptist convention, also encouraged the SBC to [consider unintended consequences](#) for Spanish-language churches—many of which use the title “pastora” to describe the wife of a male pastor.

Messengers to the 2023 SBC annual meeting in New Orleans deemed two churches not in friendly cooperation with the SBC for having women pastors, amended Article VI of the Baptist Faith and Message 2000 to specify that “the office of pastor/elder/overseer is limited to men as qualified by Scripture,” and approved the first of two required votes to amend Article III of the SBC Constitution to specify that only churches that employ “only men as any kind of pastor or elder as qualified by Scripture” can be deemed in friendly cooperation with the SBC.

Messengers also approved the creation of a study group composed of both genders to explore the defining factors of friendly cooperation for SBC churches. The group is charged with reporting its findings to messengers in 2024.

With additional reporting from Managing Editor Ken Camp.