

National Baptists hear first female preacher at meeting

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(RNS)—As she prepared to preach at the Sept. 9 evening service at the annual session of the National Baptist Convention U.S.A. Inc., Tracey L. Brown admitted to feeling the nerves she always has before entering a pulpit and “dealing with people’s souls.”

But the occasion took on other emotions when the New Jersey minister learned from convention leaders that she would be the first woman ever to preach to the 145-year-old, historically Black denomination’s annual meeting.

“I feel humbled and honored,” Brown, 63, founder and pastor of Ruth Fellowship Ministries in Plainfield, told Religion News Service hours before the service at the Kansas City Convention Center in Kansas City, Mo.

‘Tonight will go down in the history books’

Religion scholars said Brown’s preaching was a noteworthy moment, even as women have long been preaching in local Baptist churches, often without much recognition.

When Gina Stewart preached at a meeting of four Black Baptist denominations in 2024, the historic moment temporarily disappeared from the Facebook page of the NBCUSA.

A later post on the page reassured members that the stream of the service was not blocked by its officers or administrators, but there also were claims

some attendees chose not to be present when Stewart spoke.

“It’s a long time coming; it’s 2025,” said Bible scholar and retired professor Renita Weems concerning Brown’s sermon. “A lot of local churches are light-years ahead of the executive cabinet of the National Baptist Convention.”



Boise Kimber is president of the National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc. (Photo by DuWayne Sterling/NBCUSA)

Boise Kimber, who is leading his first annual session as president of the denomination, has talked about his plans to increase the visibility of women leaders in the denomination, along with younger and newer pastors. Earlier this year, he appointed Debbie Strickling-Bullock as the first female chairman of the board of the National Baptists’ Sunday School Publishing Board.

“Tonight will go down in the history books,” he said at the conclusion of the evening worship service. “So, Tracey Brown, we are grateful for you.”

Kimber has had to overcome a contentious process that marred his election last year in which he ended up as the sole candidate on the ballot after officials determined he had received the required 100 endorsements from

member churches and other National Baptist entities to qualify to run for president.

He then drew pushback this summer over reports that he and other Black church leaders were involved in accepting a donation from Target for education and economic development initiatives. even as other prominent Black Baptist leaders boycotted Target for pulling back on diversity, equity and inclusion programs.

His support for women's leadership, however, has drawn praise.

"He made some missteps, but on the woman issue he is on the right side of history," said Weems, former academic dean at American Baptist College, a National Baptist-affiliated institution in Nashville, Tenn. "I have to take my wig off to him."

Changes in the church and the nation

Brown's sermon, which lasted about 30 minutes, focused mostly on recent changes in the church. Though she misses some of the traditions lost due to the COVID-19 pandemic, she said, she noted that the church has benefited from being forced to adapt.

"The pandemic showed us what took maybe two and a half, three hours could be done meaningfully in less time with the Spirit still having his way and without being quenched," she said. "The pandemic taught us that good church did not mean all-day church. Amen, somebody."

She turned briefly to what she called the "cruel" Trump administration immigration policies being carried out by U.S. Immigration and Custom Enforcement agents, saying, "We are witnessing the legalization of criminal activities by the Ku Klux Klan, which has changed their name to ICE."

But she expressed faith in a better future. "Even now, in the turbulence of

today, we declare that the same God who brought us this far is the same God that will bring us and carry us forward,” she said.

Brown, who has served as a city councilwoman in Plainfield and has led her predominantly Black congregation for more than a quarter century, has achieved other firsts as a woman: She was the first woman elected moderator of the Middlesex Central Baptist Association of New Jersey and the first African American woman to serve as a New Jersey state police chaplain.

Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, professor emerita of African American studies and sociology at Colby College who now teaches at Hartford International University for Religion and Peace, said Brown’s preaching at the National Baptists’ annual session is another marker in a gradual prominence for Black women ministers affiliated with denominations such as the National Baptist Convention USA and the Progressive National Baptist Convention Inc.

“When a door is open, for Black women preaching, whether it be at the Hampton University Ministers’ Conference or the joint board meeting of various National Baptist associations, such as NBC or PNBC, or as will happen tonight at the National Baptist Convention, when those doors are open, they are usually not shut,” she said in an interview hours before Brown’s sermon.

“The other problem for Black women preachers is they have to be twice as good to get half as far.”