

Report: Women ministers gaining ground in Baptist life

June 23, 2011

TAMPA, Fla. (ABP) - Women are making slow but steady progress into ministry positions in Baptist churches, according to a report released by Baptist Women in Ministry.

The fourth State of Women in Baptist Life report by the 28-year-old advocacy and support organization said the ranks of ordained Baptist women have grown by an average of 64 each year so far in the 21st century. Based on that pace and previous reports, the report estimates conservatively that 2,200 Baptist women have been ordained to the gospel ministry since 1964.

In 2010, 53 ordinations of women ministers were reported by Baptist churches, mostly in a constellation of progressive Baptist organizations including the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, Alliance of Baptists and state Baptist organizations like the Baptist General Association of Virginia and the Baptist General Convention of Texas. The largest Baptist body in the United States, the Southern Baptist Convention, officially discourages women's ordination.

Baptist Women in Ministry released its first State of Women in Baptist Life report in 2005 to provide a measurable means to analyze trends within Baptist life with regard to women ministers. Baptist churches are autonomous, making it hard to collect accurate statistics, so the report relies on self-reported information gathered through e-mails, phone calls, Facebook, Baptist newspapers and websites to compare data from year to year.

In the six years since the first report, the number of ordinations of women

per year has been constant, a higher percentage of women are serving as pastors and co-pastors, the percentages of women missionaries has held steady, the numbers of women chaplains and pastoral counselors has increased and the enrollment of women in Baptist theological institutions has shown a slight increase.

“While Baptist women often feel that little has changed, the reality as evidenced by the statistics is that progress, albeit slow progress, is being made,” noted Pam Durso, a Baptist historian and executive director of Baptist Women in Ministry, who compiled the statistical portion of the report released June 23 at the group’s annual meeting in Tampa, Fla.

Most churches that have ordained women employ them in staff positions like ministers of children, youth, education, missions and spiritual formation. Church positions most closed to women are those of pastor and co-pastor. Durso found 135 Baptist women pastors or co-pastors in 2010, up from 102 in 2005.

The CBF, a moderate organization that supports women’s ordination, reported about 1,800 contributing churches in 2010, Durso said. Since not all churches with women pastors are CBF-related, she said at best the percentage of CBF churches led by women was 7.5 percent. In the Alliance of Baptists, a smaller and more liberal group, the average was more than one in four, 28 percent.

“While women still face challenges in finding pastoral roles, the increases in both the numbers and the percentages indicate that incremental change is taking place,” the report said.

Nearly 40 percent of ministerial students enrolled at 14 theological schools identified as ministry partners with CBF were women, higher than the national average of members of the Association of Theological Schools.

Previous State of Women in Baptist Life reports were released for 2005,

2006 and 2007. In recent years the organization has branched out into programs like the Martha Stearns Marshall Month of Preaching, an annual emphasis that urges Baptist churches to invite a woman into their pulpit during the month of February, and publication of a book of sermons written by women preachers.

While those new ventures have kept the organization's leadership busy, Durso said, the leadership team determined to continue in commitment to gathering, analyzing and reporting information about Baptist clergywomen and commissioned a new report to be distributed in June 2011.