

# Waco pastor featured in first documentary of women ministers

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Mary Alice Birdwhistell knew at a young age she was called to ministry. So did her mom. The only question was what kind.

As far as Birdwhistell knew, the only options for her were children's ministry, music ministry or maybe becoming a missionary to China. The answer became clear, however, the first time she stepped behind a pulpit to preach.

[“No. 1: Mary Alice Birdwhistell,”](#) a documentary of Birdwhistell's journey to the pastorate, is a co-production of [Ethics Daily](#) and [Baptist Women in Ministry](#) that premiered Nov. 16 in Waco, where she is the senior pastor of [Calvary Baptist](#).

Though Birdwhistell was and is Baptist, a Methodist minister in Kentucky was the first to ask Birdwhistell to fill the pulpit for him. To his astonishment, she said she'd never had the opportunity before. His question set in motion serious soul-searching.

Birdwhistell agonized over whether or not her preaching would disobey God.

“Is this what I want or what you want?” she asked God.

Ultimately, she accepted the invitation and discovered new life when she stepped behind the pulpit.

Mitch Randall, executive director of Ethics Daily, introduced the premiere

as a celebration of women in ministry, but not everyone sees women in ministry as something to celebrate. Many disagree with and criticize the calling of women pastors. In responding to critics, Birdwhistell says she is her own worst critic, noting she constantly is seeking the Holy Spirit's guidance.

Birdwhistell's father—whose great-grandfather was an influential Baptist pastor in Lawrenceburg, Kentucky—also struggled to affirm women as pastors. After his own journey, which involved seeing God at work in his daughter's life, he became supportive and proud of Birdwhistell in the pastorate.

Pam Durso, executive director of Baptist Women in Ministry, explained the hope behind the co-produced series of documentaries that begins with "No. 1: Mary Alice Birdwhistell." She said when young girls can see women in the pulpit, taking up the offering and making decisions in the church, they will know it's possible for God to call them to leadership in the church. Likewise, when search committees see women pastoring in these documentaries, they will know they can call women as pastors.

Randall went a step further. A large reason for co-producing these documentaries is to make clear "not only do we support women in senior pastor roles, but we are calling women to senior pastor roles," he said. Despite more women graduating from seminary prepared for the pastorate, the number of women graduates afforded places to serve is exceedingly small.

In the face of such odds, Birdwhistell's advice to her younger self is to remember she can do hard things and that God has been preparing and providing for her in many ways for the role of pastor.

To other young women who sense a call to ministry, Birdwhistell says, "You really have to bring your best self. I wish there weren't different standards

[for women], but there are.” Also, “believe in yourself.”