

# Evangelical women struggle to follow their calling

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—Kat Armstrong didn't know much about the Bible when she first became a Christian as a teenager.



Beth Moore is founder of Living Proof Ministries in Houston.  
(Courtesy Photo)

Knowing she was eager to learn, a pastor at First Baptist Church in Houston suggested she check out a Sunday school class for adults taught by one of the church's members, a woman named Beth Moore.

The class changed Armstrong's life.

Moore, not only Armstrong's hometown Sunday school teacher but also a best-selling author and celebrity Bible teacher, eventually encouraged Armstrong to go to seminary and make studying the Bible her life's work. Armstrong took that advice, later graduating from Dallas Theological Seminary and becoming a Bible teacher and writer like her mentor and friend.

Armstrong is one of a number of women preachers and teachers whose call to ministry was inspired in part by Moore's example. Some have been able to stay in evangelical churches—where women often are not allowed the role of pastor—by avoiding the title “pastor” and going by “Bible teacher” instead. Others had to leave their home churches when the limits placed on women leaders became too much to bear.

Data from the Association of Religion Data Archives shows many congregations say they allow women to preach, including most Black Protestant (90.3 percent) and white liberal or moderate churches (95.1 percent) and just over half (56.9 percent) of conservative, evangelical and fundamentalist congregations. Only about one in five (18.4) of Catholic congregations allows women to preach.

But allowing women to preach and allowing women to lead a congregation are different things. According to the 2019 National Congregations study, 13.5 percent of congregations in the United States are led by a woman pastor or other clergy. About 30 percent of white liberal or moderate churches have a woman pastor, as do about 16.2 percent of Black Protestant churches. By comparison, women lead only 2.4 percent of conservative, evangelical or fundamentalist congregations.

## **What does the Bible say about women in ministry?**



Meredith Stone

Meredith Stone, executive director of Baptist Women in Ministry, said the term “pastor” carries great weight.

“If we’re constantly giving women different titles, then that’s communicating we don’t trust the women the same way we trust the men with the same work,” she said.

Baptist Women in Ministry was started in the 1980s, when the role of women as pastors still was up for debate. At the time, a growing number of Southern Baptist women were taking leadership roles in churches, a trend that ended once the Southern Baptist Convention added to its statement of faith a ban on women serving as senior pastors.

Prohibitions on women preaching or serving as senior pastor in many denominations, like the SBC, are drawn from New Testament verses like 1 Timothy 2:12, where the Apostle Paul writes, “I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet.”

Some denominations that allow women as pastors draw on other verses that assert there should be no discrimination in the church, like Galatians 3:28, which reads, “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” Proponents of women pastors also point out the New Testament says the first people to spread the news about the resurrection of Jesus were women.

## **Women in ministry walk a fine line**

Sharon Hodde Miller, a teaching pastor at Bright City Church in Durham, N.C., said she first felt a call to ministry after hearing Moore speak at the Passion Conference for young adults. It was the first time she’d seen a woman teach the Bible “with power and authority.”



Sharon Hodde Miller

Women teachers and preachers, even if they are not allowed to be pastors, have wielded enormous influence by writing books and speaking at conferences, Miller said. That has only increased in the age of social media.

Still, Miller said, women in ministry have to walk a fine line. They have influence as long as they don't address controversial topics. For a long time, Miller said she was "more beholden to this nice Christian woman image than I was to Jesus." But, like Moore, if they address issues like sexism or race or politics, they can get into trouble.

During the Trump years, Moore found herself increasingly crossing that line. Moore, whose Bible study materials were staples in Southern Baptist churches and whose "Living Proof Live" events filled stadiums, was flabbergasted at the way Southern Baptist leaders supported Donald Trump after the Access Hollywood tapes released in 2016 revealed the then-presidential candidate boasting about assaulting women.

After criticizing Trump and calling out sexism in the SBC on social media, Moore became a flashpoint. Things got even worse in 2019, after Moore joked on Twitter about speaking at a Mother's Day church service.

A year of racial reckoning nationwide and within the SBC was a final straw. In early March, Moore told Religion News Service she was leaving the SBC

and cutting ties with LifeWay Christian Resources, the denomination's publishing arm.

## **Scholar saw Moore's departure from SBC as inevitable**

Courtney Pace, scholar-in-residence with Equity for Women in the Church, has written about what she called "the inevitable evolution of Beth Moore." Moore has been more than a Bible teacher a long time, Pace said, even if she was not willing to admit it. She's really been a preacher, even if she stood behind a "Bible stand" rather than a pulpit.



Courtney Pace

Pace, who grew up Southern Baptist and used to watch Moore's videos while working out, said when she went to seminary, a number of her female classmates wanted to be "the next Beth Moore." Even after leaving the SBC, she kept an eye on Moore and eventually began, as an academic, to study her.

She'd long been expecting Moore to leave the SBC. Over the years, Pace said, she could see Moore chaffing against the restrictions men in the

church placed on her, especially the kind of deference she was expected to show to men, as if she needed their permission to be in ministry.

Growing up Southern Baptist, Pace said, she felt the same restrictions—as if she had to be “as small and quiet as possible” even when she thought God wanted her to raise her voice.

“If you live your life doing what everybody says you should or what you’re supposed to, you’re never going to get to be yourself,” she said.

JoAnn Hummel, lead teaching pastor at Bent Tree Bible Fellowship in Carrollton, considers herself a bit of an outlier. She has held the title of pastor ever since she joined the staff of Bent Tree in the 1990s, fresh out of seminary.

Pete Briscoe, senior pastor at the time, believed it was important for her to be called a pastor, rather than some other euphemism that downplayed her leadership role, she said. Hummel started off teaching women and children. Then, as the church grew from a congregation of about 300 to a megachurch, she oversaw adult ministries and eventually became one of the lead preachers at the church.

Now in her 60s, Hummel is starting to look forward to retirement and the next chapter of ministry. She hopes Moore is, too.

“God’s working his plan,” she said. “And he always has included his girls. So, there’s always going to be something for us to do.”

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