

Baylor prof records stories of Baptist women in ministry

September 16, 2022

Mandy McMichael of Baylor University has spent the past two years interviewing Baptist women in ministry, asking them to describe their experiences.



Mandy McMichael is associate director and J. David Slover assistant professor of ministry guidance at Baylor University. (Photo / Baylor University)

“It has inspired me, how dedicated these women have been to living into their calling, no matter the cost,” McMichael said.

McMichael, the J. David Slover assistant professor of ministry guidance at Baylor, hopes to create an oral history collection that can be a resource and tool for young Baptist women moving forward.

“They just don’t know the stories of women who have come before them,”

she said. “Some of them still haven’t heard a woman preach.”

Meredith Stone, executive director of Baptist Women in Ministry, emphasized the value of the stories being gathered.



Meredith Stone

“Because of the long-standing discrimination against women’s leadership among Baptists, bias against women is embedded in the foundations of a Baptist expression of faith,” Stone said. “Hearing and recording the stories of Baptist women’s callings helps us to know where we have been, so that we can form a vision for where we need to be.”

McMichael acknowledged that reality and wanted to provide a resource to help students struggling with their own calling to ministry.

“That’s part of what I wanted to do for my students ... give them this collection of stories to say, ‘You’re not alone, and there’s not one way to do it,’” she said.

‘Not a closed collection’

With the support of Baylor’s Institute for Oral History, each interview has been recorded and transcribed. By December, McMichael hopes to

complete 60 interviews, but she expects her research will continue to be a work in progress even after that.

“It’s not a closed collection. It will always—in my view—be open to having more stories added to it,” she said.

McMichael’s research has been funded by a two-year grant from Louisville Institute, which has allowed her to expand her vision for the project.

“I’ve interviewed some women who are in seminary now, all the way to women who have retired from ministry,” she explained.

In the long run, McMichael hopes to build an interactive, in-depth database that also will allow users to access related resources.

“There will also be an annotated bibliography that lives with the oral history collection. So, you’ll have ... primary sources of women telling their stories, but you’ll also have books, articles, podcasts that have been done about women in ministry,” she explained.

While the development of her catalog is a hope for the future, McMichael touched on the hope her project has provided in the present.

“Hearing people’s stories is sacred to me. Being trusted with their joys and their struggles is something I don’t take lightly. I have cried in interviews. I have laughed in interviews. But I leave each interview full of hope for the church,” she said.

“I think that that’s one of my favorite things about being a scholar, about being a writer, is saying: All of life is complex and complicated, and we should look for the similarities and how we can reach across divides.”

Answering the call ‘outside of traditional channels’

Still, she acknowledged the bias within the Baptist tradition against women in church leadership roles.

“I’m seeing those themes of ... women sometimes having to go outside of traditional channels to get the same support and just to find a way to work,” she said. Some Baptist women who feel called to the pastorate have “had to reimagine the places that they’re serving as pastoral ministry roles, she noted.

Stone also commented on the lack of denominational backing for women in ministry.

“Even among more supportive communities, there is often a disconnect between beliefs about women’s equality that are professed and what is practiced in our congregations,” she stated.

McMichael underscored that same idea.

“This has been said before in other places, but I’ll say it again: Baptist churches who support women in ministry, who theologically agree that women can be called to serve in every level of leadership in the church, need to hire women,” she said.

“Support is great, but these women want to serve, so give them places to serve. ... Hire women to serve in denominational leadership besides [ministry to] children, youth and women.”

In some circles, women in ministry are “demonized” by people “who think that they are out there just trying to prove a point or champion a cause,” McMichael observed.

Call for churches to ‘expand their imaginations’

“When you slow down and listen to their story ... they are people who are called by God to do this work in the world, just like male ministers are,” she said. “It’s a calling. It’s a vocation. And it’s been good to step into that and listen.”

McMichael hopes churches will consider providing places of service to women who feel called to ministry.

“There are so many churches that are looking for ministers and so many women who feel called to ministry looking for places to serve,” she said. “Wouldn’t it be great if all those churches looking for ministers would expand their imaginations enough to hire the women who want to come and serve alongside them?”

As her two-year grant draws to a close, McMichael reflects on what she has learned through her interviews.

“This has been a hope-filled project for me, not because everything has worked out perfectly all the time, but because I am confronted with the evidence of God’s work in the [lives] of women and the way they have used their gifts to serve God—even when so much has been stacked against them,” she said.

“I just really hope, yes, that my students will feel less alone, but also that any attention that’s brought to their stories will result in other people taking down a few of those roadblocks and making their path just a little bit easier.”

McMichael continues to seek Baptist women in ministry to interview. Email Mandy_McMichael@baylor.edu or call (254) 710-6353.

Lauren Turner, a student at the University of Mary Hardin-Baylor, is serving this semester as an intern with the Baptist Standard.