

Female pastoral resident called to serve N.C. church

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Julie Merritt Lee, pastoral resident at Wilshire Baptist Church in Dallas, takes over as pastor of Providence Baptist Church in Hendersonville, N.C., in July.

HENDERSONVILLE, N.C. (ABP) — A North Carolina Baptist church has called its second woman pastor.

Providence Baptist Church in Hendersonville, N.C., voted unanimously May 3 to [call](#) Julie Merritt Lee as pastor. Lee, who takes the pastoral reins following the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship General Assembly in July, says she is excited about her call.

Many female ministers in moderate Baptist life run into what has been termed a "stained-glass ceiling" that blocks them from achieving the role of

senior pastor. Providence Baptist Church is an exception. It has had a woman as its senior pastor from the start.

Gail Coulter was assistant pastor at First Baptist Church in Asheville, N.C., before becoming Providence's first pastor in 2002. The church sought membership in the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina, but determined to affiliate nationally with the CBF instead of the Southern Baptist Convention.

That decision, coupled with calling a woman as pastor, didn't sit well with some conservatives. Two local Baptist associations refused to accept the church, making it ineligible to receive church-starting funds from the state convention.

The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of North Carolina and five CBF-related churches stepped up to help sponsor the church. Coulter went on to serve a term as CBF moderator, before retiring from the pastorate in 2008.

Lee, a 2005 graduate of Baylor University's George W. Truett Theological Seminary, currently works as a pastoral resident at Wilshire Baptist Church in Dallas. Wilshire began its residency program in 2002 for the purpose of preparing future ministers for moderate Baptist churches.

Funded by a Lilly grant, the [program](#) gives recent seminary or divinity-school graduates two years of practical ministry experience and learning in real-life ministry situations. Modeled after the medical residency that physicians enter following medical school, pastoral residents preach, baptize, serve communion and perform other ministry tasks under tutelage of an experienced senior pastor.

[George Mason](#), Wilshire's senior pastor, said Providence Baptist Church is making a good choice.

"Julie is a gifted and capable pastor," Mason said. "Whether preaching,

teaching, counseling, leading worship, raising and managing a budget, or casting a vision for the church, Julie knows the work and is ready for the challenge. Our church heartily acknowledges and recommends her pastoral gifts and graces."

Clarissa Strickland, a networking specialist who manages pastoral-placement services for CBF, [rejoiced](#) when Providence elected a female as lead pastor, an event she said "happens all too seldom" in CBF life.

Strickland said the thing she hears most often from pastor-search committees when considering the possibility of a woman candidate is: "I don't think our church is ready for that."

Strickland called Lee's hiring "another baby step for women in senior-pastor roles."

Mason said whatever skills Lee will bring, as a woman, to the role pales in comparison to what she brings as a minister.

"Men can be sensitive counselors and women can be strong leaders," he said. "I congratulate Providence for calling Julie, less because they are making a point about having a woman pastor (since they have had one before) and more because they are pointing toward the day when churches think of competence before gender."

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