

Commentary: Baptist women in ministry across the globe

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My first Baptist World Alliance event was the BWA Youth Conference in Portland, Ore., in 1974. I was a young, excited, self-confident youth leader from Germany, where women took an equal part in leading various church ministries. Meeting so many young people from other continents and cultures was a true eye-opener.

One of the girls in our small family group never participated in the discussions. She would not respond to any questions directed to her. As the group leader, I despaired.

My supervisor advised me not to pressure the girl. He explained: "She is a member of an indigenous tribe where women are not allowed to speak in public."

I was shocked. I never had heard of anything like that.

This is a good example of our reality as a global Baptist family with many diverse cultures, belief systems and social structures. With so many people on the move around the world—migrant workers, refugees, globetrotters included—even our local churches are becoming more and more diverse.

When women lead by necessity

In this context, the role of women in ministry is also diverse. We organize our church life in different ways, often greatly influenced by our cultural context. In some areas, women in ministry and women in senior leadership roles are seen as a normality, while in other areas it is something unheard

of and unthinkable.

In some places, women take up leadership responsibility out of necessity. In those places, men just are not available; they are absent from the church for various reasons.

In most Baptist churches around the world, women are in the majority. In many places of the global South, men are away for work, returning home only for a few weeks per year. Or men are at war, leaving women and children behind.

Often, the immense streams of refugees consist only of women and children. When they settle somewhere and start gathering as a church, there are no men available. Without women taking up leadership for the ministry of the church, many churches would not exist.

Some may argue these are emergency situations. In normal life, women should not be given a prominent role in ministry. Indeed, there are conflicting opinions among our churches around the world. How, then, can we still maintain our bond of love and share in God's mission together?

Diverse views, one mission

Everywhere in the world, women are very pragmatic about handling this issue. They are survivors, and they are the ones mainly responsible for the survival of their children. They have learned to adapt to adverse circumstances.

While investing their God-given gifts and talents into the ministry of the church, they influence and shape the growth of the local church, as well as overarching church networks and ministries in an amazing way.

Just think of all the Sunday school teachers who, week after week, explain the word of God to the children of the church and neighborhood, including

street children. Most of these teachers are women. They carry one of the greatest responsibilities in church ministry.

In many places, most pastors of local churches are men. Usually they are married. Very often, the pastor's wife carries equal responsibility for the church's wellbeing, even if she is not recognized as a leader in her own standing. Such women often have a calling to ministry themselves, and they exercise their calling by sharing and influencing their husband's service.

I met women in some African countries who singlehandedly evangelized whole villages and founded and shepherded churches. They led them in every aspect, because they followed the calling of Jesus.

In Asia and Latin America, female doctors and missionaries—many Baptists among them—have gone into inaccessible areas to bring the gospel to suffering and lost people.

I myself have been a general secretary—an executive leader—of our Baptist denomination in Germany. Some churches were not in favor of putting a woman in such a high leadership position. Several churches refused the pulpit to me or any other woman. I respected this, and had no problem sending one of my male colleagues instead, if needed.

When I was a missionary in Africa, in some places women were not being ordained. However, I was not seen as a threat, but as an enabler of the indigenous leadership, and I readily submitted to the authority of my hosts.

Guiding principles

I believe there are a few principles in the way the church of Jesus Christ lives a healthy and fruitful life that help us deal with the issue of women and men equally in ministry.

The most important is the need to submit to the lordship of Jesus Christ.

This is easier said than done, because we seem to vie for power rather than willingly hand over control. Humility is a crucial way of life for servant leadership.

Equally crucial is authenticity, the congruence of talking and doing. This shows best in the way we treat each other with respect and appreciation of every person, which will lead to inclusion and integration of all, irrespective of status.

Unfortunately, we seem to be in constant danger of being tempted by power and hence easily become a church where status is more important than loving relationships that glorify Christ.

If we learn to accept each other as equally valued, diversely gifted and inclusively called to serve the Lord, we will understand we need each other and complement each other in uniting under the leadership of Christ.

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