

Commentary: Women in ministry need more than neutrality

July 12, 2023

At the 2023 Southern Baptist Convention, messengers voted to affirm the decision to disfellowship Saddleback Church and Fern Creek Baptist Church because they have women serving as pastors.

They also voted to approve the first reading of a constitutional amendment barring churches that affirm, appoint or employ women as pastors of any kind from fellowship with the SBC. An additional reading will need to be approved next summer for it to go into effect.

[Baptist Women in Ministry](#), the national organization I lead as executive director, has responded in numerous ways, including publishing an [open letter to Baptist women](#) signed by more than 3,500 people, providing resources and support for women who were the focus of these efforts, and publicly speaking out against the harmful actions taken.

I also have heard the stories of many female ministers and pastors affected by the SBC's actions. The public nature of the SBC's reiteration of women's inequality—including the public targeting of women serving as pastors of all kinds—has been painful.

Some women wonder if their congregations still support their calling. Some are carrying the weight of congregational conversations about denominational affiliations centered around their personal efforts to be faithful to God's call. Some have experienced the pain of being kicked out of their faith family.

Others who have appeared on public lists against their will have experienced intense anxiety about potential harassment, while others have experienced harassment directly.

Moreover, the SBC's actions and the public conversation around it have stirred feelings of inadequacy, brokenness and rejection for most women in ministry among Baptists as we were reminded loudly that many in our Baptist family do not believe we are fully free in Christ.

In moments like these, neutrality is not enough.

Women aren't a secondary issue

Both the Baptist General Convention of Texas and the Baptist General Association of Virginia hold unique positions as state Baptist conventions that endorse local church autonomy with regard to women's roles in leadership as ministers and pastors.

In [*The State of Women in Baptist Life Report 2021*](#), released by Baptist Women in Ministry last summer, 3.6 percent of churches affiliated with the BGAV had women serving as senior pastors or co-pastors, and 0.6 percent of churches affiliated with Texas Baptists had women serving in these roles.

These numbers showed only a marginal increase from previous years and are lower than Baptist denominational groups that have taken a stance explicitly affirming women in ministry.

The *Baptist Standard* published [an article](#) when the report was released that includes this quote from me: "In the case of people who have been marginalized by the church, autonomy—while necessary and celebrated—is not enough to see progress in the form of more people created in the divine image being able to utilize fully their gifts and callings in service of the church. More concerted and visible efforts of education, advocacy and

elevation within these denominational groups will be needed to move these statistics forward.”

In statements responding to the SBC’s actions, both the [BGCT](#) and [BGAV](#) maintained positions that celebrated local church autonomy on the matter of women in ministry. But if women ever will be regarded fully as equally created in God’s image and worthy of God’s calling, more must be done.

For those who claim the primacy of local church autonomy on the matter, women in ministry often has been called a “secondary issue” or a “divisive issue.” These labels exacerbate the pain experienced by women in ministry and further reinforce patriarchal values.

Telling women that following their calling is a secondary issue communicates the freedom of women is secondary, while the freedom of men to stay in leadership is primary. It also suggests the abundant life found through redemption in Christ is not available to half of the population.

Calling women in ministry a divisive issue conveys to women that for the sake of unity they need to be silent and forgo being faithful to God’s call. But that unity comes at the cost of women’s wholeness and the gospel’s message being spread farther—both of which are too high a cost.

Forcing women’s silence in the name of unity reveals a belief that women’s voices, perspectives and callings are not as important as maintaining the status quo of organizations.

Women are not seeking to be divisive. We are seeking to be faithful to God’s call.

An affirmative motion

Pointing to local church autonomy is the equivalent of taking a neutral position on women in ministry. When a neutral position is taken on any issue of oppression, the dominant position and practice simply continues. When we are silent, nothing changes.

For Christianity's first 2,000 years, the church has communicated men have more value since they have been the only persons fully free to participate in God's work in the world without restriction. Nothing will change if we are neutral.

I believe it is possible for a denominational body to respect the autonomy of the local church, while at the same time encouraging churches with resources and initiatives to seek the wholeness of life Jesus offers *all persons*.

For these reasons, I am working for a motion to be brought at the BGCT annual meeting in McAllen next week asking the messengers to adopt a formal position of affirmation for women in ministry and to turn that affirmation into action.

I have also been in conversation with women in ministry in Virginia about similar actions being taken at the BGAV annual meeting this coming November.

A motion like this would not advocate for affirmation of women in ministry to become a matter of fellowship or disfellowship within these denominational bodies. Instead, it would ask the messengers of these conventions to send a strong message that women are fully valued by both God *and* God's people, and to take specific actions putting that belief into practice.

For Texas, BGCT messengers historically have expressed support of women in ministry. The messengers passed resolutions in both 1998 and 2021 articulating support for women in ministry. Further, in 2001, the messengers rejected adopting the 2000 Baptist Faith and Message after revisions were made that were oppressive to women.

Baylor University's George W. Truett Theological Seminary has been outspoken about its [affirmation of women in all ministerial and pastoral roles](#), and in *The State of Women in Baptist Life Report 2021* referenced above, Truett self-reported 45 percent of its Masters-level students were women.

Additionally, the faculty of Baylor University's Department of Religion [affirm egalitarian leadership in the church and world](#), and report more than 50 percent of their majors are women.

Women potentially make up half, or more, of the students studying for ministry at Texas Baptists' largest affiliated university and seminary.

If the BGCT is going to continue to provide funding for the theological education of these women at Truett and other Texas Baptist schools, a clear message is needed for after their education—Texas Baptists value the gifts women can bring to the church. This message can be sent by putting initiatives into place that advocate for congregations to affirm and employ women.

'Clear is kind'

In her *Dare to Lead* program, Brené Brown writes about brave leadership. She asserts: "[Clear is kind. Unclear is unkind.](#)"

In relationships, if we are not clear about our expectations and boundaries, it is unkind for people to have to pay the price for our lack of clarity.

Therefore, when we are clear, even if it means having hard conversations, then we are demonstrating kindness to those around us.

Claiming women in ministry only to be a matter of local church autonomy is unclear. Women do not know if the churches and convention that provided money for their theological education will value their leadership to the point of calling them to lead. Whether a church will call them is unclear.

A motion of affirmation and action would call the BGCT to the kindness of clarity. I hope BGCT messengers will see the importance of sending a clear, kind, bold and affirming message to women in ministry and leadership in moments like these.

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