

# Commentary: Most women in SBC would welcome a woman pastor

June 12, 2019

WASHINGTON (RNS)—Southern Baptist rock star author and speaker Beth Moore [set off](#) a social media firestorm recently with a single tweet.

Moore, who calls herself a Bible teacher rather than a pastor or preacher, mentioned she'd been speaking at a church on Mother's Day.

Her critics say she crossed a line.

## Southern Baptist position on gender of pastors

Only men should be allowed to be pastors, according to the Southern Baptist Convention's statement of faith, known as the Baptist Faith & Message. So only men should preach.

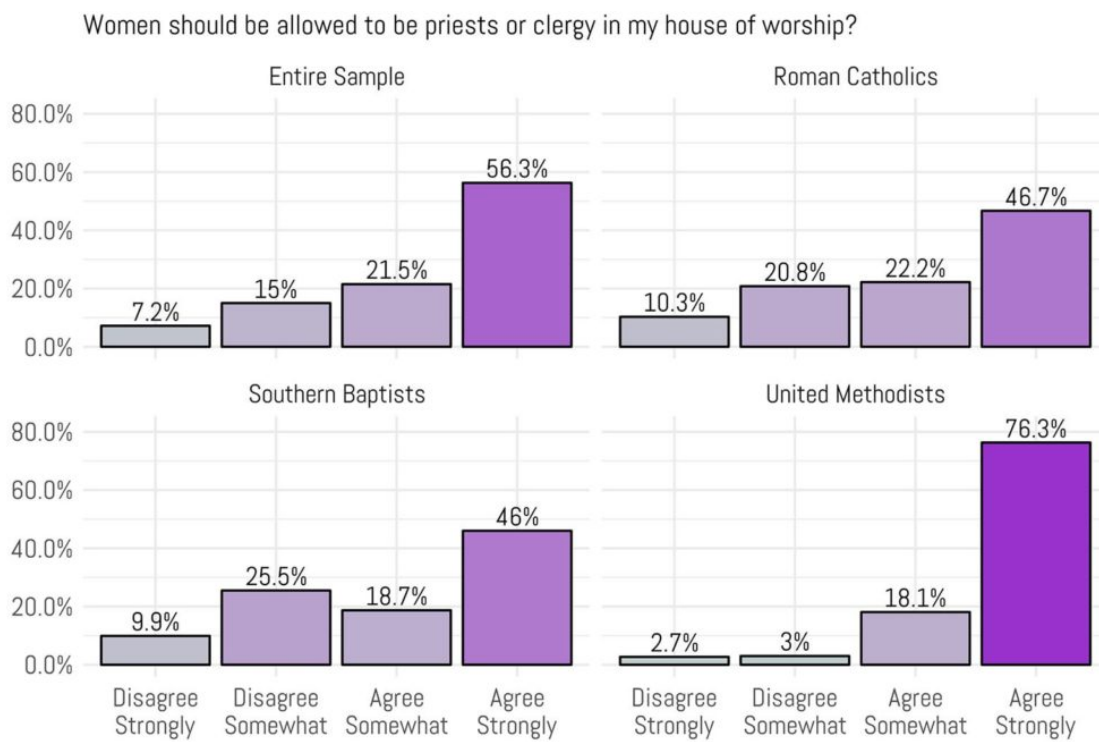
The prohibition on women clergy is shared by the nation's two largest faith groups—the 14.8 million member SBC and the Roman Catholic Church.

Both the Baptist [Faith and Message](#) and the Catholic Church's [Catechism](#) strictly prohibit women from being pastors or priests.

That puts these groups at odds with other church groups, like the United Methodists, who have ordained women for five decades. It may also put them at odds with people in the pews.

# Differences between clergy and laity

The 2011 [Faith Matters Survey](#)—a study from Harvard and Notre Dame that surveyed 2,646 Americans—asked respondents how much they agreed with the following statement, “Women should be allowed to be priests or clergy in my house of worship.”



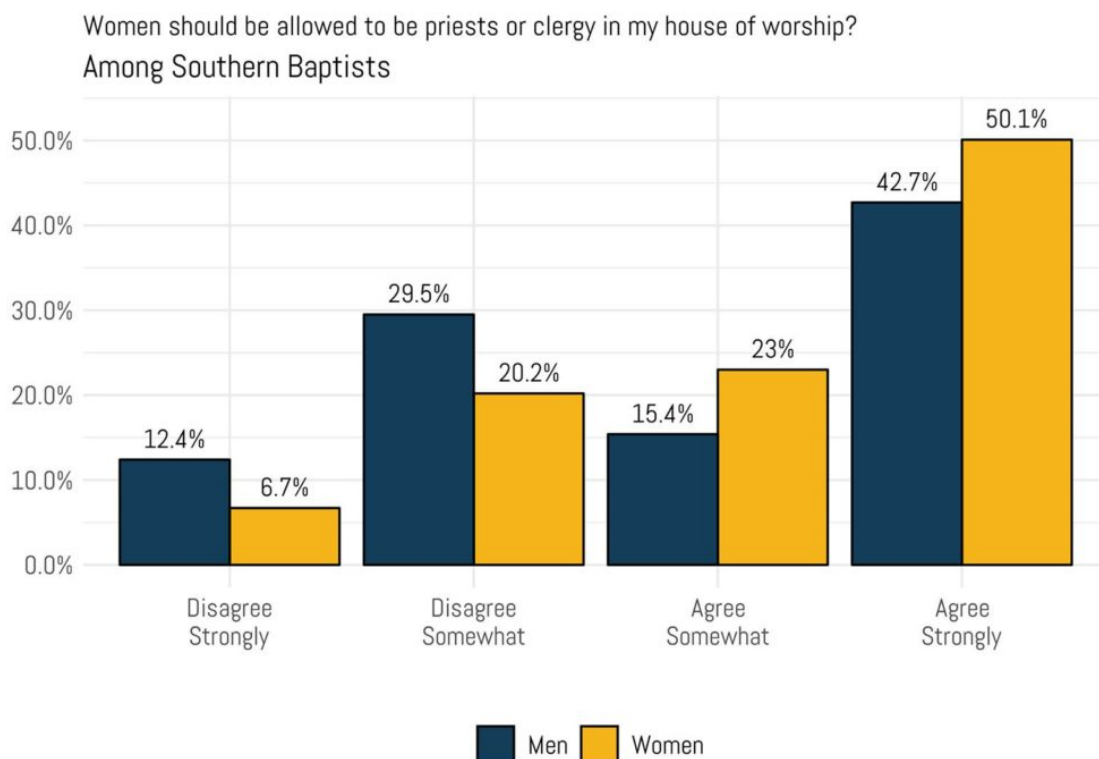
@ryanburge  
Data: Faith Matters 2011

Courtesy of RNS

Three quarters (77.8 percent) of Americans agree. That includes two-thirds (64.7 percent) of Southern Baptists and Roman Catholics (68.9 percent). That could accurately be described as strong levels of support.

Southern Baptist women, in particular, seem ready to accept women as pastors.

Three quarters (73.1 percent) of female Southern Baptists favor women in the pulpit, compared to just 58.1 percent of Southern Baptist men. And half of Southern Baptist women along with four in 10 men strongly support women clergy.



@ryanburge  
Data: Faith Matters 2011

Courtesy of RNS

About 12 percent of Southern Baptist men strongly disagree with women clergy. So do about 7 percent of Southern Baptist women.

Looked at from this view, a doctrinal change for the SBC on this issue would seem to please many more people than it would anger.

So, why hasn't it happened?

# **Link between attendance and view of leadership**

This reluctance to change seems linked to how often Southern Baptist men go to church.

A bit of explanation.

I broke the SBC down into four groups based on biblical literalism and gender along with controls for race and education.

For women, there is no discernible relationship, meaning whether a Southern Baptist woman is a biblical literalist or not, there is no statistically significant change in her view of women as pastors at any level of church attendance.

The same is not true for men, however.

For male Southern Baptists who are biblical literalists, the more that they attend church the less likely they are to support female pastors. In fact, support for women clergy is incredibly low among Southern Baptist men who are biblical literalists and attend church multiple times a week.

## **How things stay the same in the SBC**

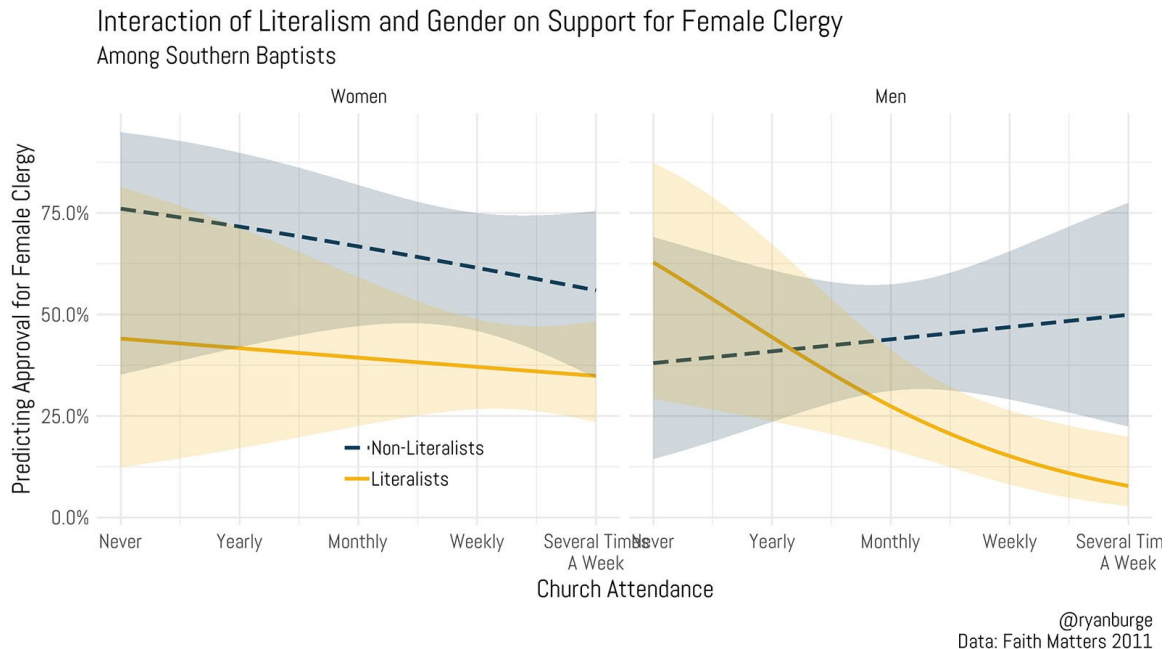
This result has a significant bearing on the mechanisms that could lead to change in the Southern Baptists' official position on female pastors.

The change would have to be approved by the [messengers](#) at the convention's annual meeting.

While I could not find hard data on this, I think it's fair to say that many of the messengers who are meeting this week in Birmingham are pastors of

Southern Baptist churches.

And what do those pastors look like?



Courtesy of RNS

They must be male, they are very likely biblical literalists, and they obviously attend church multiple times a week.

Think of it in terms of political conventions—they only attract the “true” believers. The same is true for denominational meetings.

While strong majorities of people in the pews would vote to make the switch, the convention delegates will continue to hold the line.

Compounding this issue is the fact that the SBC has lost [1.3 million members](#) since 2006. Only half of children raised Southern Baptist [stay that way](#) as adults, and the religious “nones” have increased [266 percent since 1990](#).

Trying times lie ahead for the Southern Baptist Convention.

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