

Guest editorial: “We’re just not ready yet”

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Over the past few decades, more churches have become open to women serving in leadership roles. In Baptist life, some churches never will ordain a woman as a deacon or hire a woman to serve in a ministerial role, but others are changing their minds about the ways in which women’s gifts can benefit the church.

In Texas, countless women are serving as children’s ministers, youth ministers, campus ministers, chaplains, women’s ministers and more. Women are being ordained to be deacons and to the gospel ministry.

Counting the women serving in these roles across our state is a difficult task, because there are so many of them. But tallying the number of women serving as senior pastors or co-pastors among Texas Baptists is much easier.

State of women ...

At the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship’s general assembly this summer, Baptist Women in Ministry released its fifth *State of Women in Baptist Life* report.

The statistics BWIM reports include the number of ordinations of Baptist women, the number of women enrolled in moderate Baptist seminaries and the number of women pastoring or co-pastoring Baptist congregations.

In Texas, BWIM reported 28 women serving as pastors or co-pastors of congregations affiliated with the Baptist General Convention of Texas. That number accounts for 0.47 percent of Texas Baptists’ 5,318 churches.

Although the report indicates this number is an increase for Texas since the last report was published in 2010, it also notes some of the increase has been due to better record keeping.

Across the board, though, the numbers are up for women's ordinations, women pastors and women seminary students throughout moderate Baptist organizations—those affiliated with Texas Baptists, Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, Baptist General Association of Virginia, Alliance of Baptists and the District of Columbia Baptist Convention.

Notably, the number of women pastoring or co-pastoring moderate Baptist congregations has increased from 102 in 2005 to 174 in 2016, a 70.6 percent increase. Wonderful and encouraging news!

But among the groups represented, Texas Baptists hold the lowest percentage of congregations that have a woman serving as pastor.

Why so slow?

As discussion ensued in breakouts and in conversations associated with this report, people asked why the numbers are not rising faster. And one phrase kept coming up. People who work with search committees and those who relayed conversations with their own congregations had repeatedly heard, "We're just not ready yet."

The churches that are not ready may have had women serving as deacons for 20 years, women called to minister on their staffs as associate pastors, and women preaching in their pulpits from time to time. These churches may even have young women who grew up in their congregations and felt a call to ministry while sitting in their pews, and who are now enrolled in seminary or even pastoring congregations themselves.

But still, "We're just not ready yet."

For those congregations that have decided women will not have roles of leadership, the Baptist principle of church freedom—the autonomy of the local congregation—insists we respect their decision. However, we also can supply resources that may provide a perspective on women in ministry members perhaps have not yet considered. so that all congregations can make fully informed decisions.

Encouragement needed

But for churches that affirm women in ministry in numerous ways yet still claim not to be ready, we must encourage each other to do more.

Also at CBF's general assembly this summer, groups held several important events that addressed race relations, including a luncheon hosted by the New Baptist Covenant, a dinner held by Baptist News Global, and an excursion to the International Civil Rights Center and Museum.

While attending some of these gatherings, I once again was struck by the all-too-present consequences of systemic oppression in our society. As the speakers shined light on the ways in which I am complicit in and benefit from the white privilege that terrorizes God's beloved children, I sadly uttered to the person sitting next to me, "We may never get past this."

But 10 seconds later, my faith in the goodness and redemption of God kicked in, and I added, "So we must keep having this conversation."

We must do more.

The *State of Women in Baptist Life* report demonstrates we have made strong and hopeful strides in the area of women in ministry. But we must keep having this conversation. We must do more. Although God's goodness and redemption may be found in 10 seconds—for some—the divisions created by God's beloved children will take generations to heal.

Maybe it's time

So, maybe it's time to take one step more than we think we are ready for.

In your congregation, if women teach children's Sunday school, ask them to teach adult Sunday school. If women sing in the choir, hand them the microphone so they can lead the congregational singing. If women pass out bulletins, empower them to serve the Lord's Supper. If women already do the work of a deacon, ordain them as deacons. If women read Scripture, give them opportunities to proclaim God's story in a sermon.

And if women serve as ministers on a church staff, maybe that church can take one step more and call a woman to serve as their pastor—even if they think they're not quite ready yet.

After all, I'm almost certain the first century wasn't ready for Jesus, but he did a pretty amazing job anyway.

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