

Right or Wrong? Pragmatic hiring of women pastors

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Some non-Baptist churches have taken a pragmatic approach to hiring women pastors. If a pastorate is vacant and no males are viable candidates, then women are considered. Is pragmatism an ethical-enough motive for hiring women pastors?

Before answering, I will note that in the Baptist world, churches take many perspectives on how they view women in leadership roles. There is no simple “right” and “left” on the issue of how women should serve in churches, but many expressions of the middle, where most Baptist churches live. I will answer this question from the perspective of those who prayerfully and reflectively have studied the scriptures about women in the Bible and find no prohibition against women serving in any role, even as senior pastor.

On the one hand, any occasion for a woman to exhibit leadership in a congregation is positive. Because opportunities for women who feel called to pastoral roles are so rare, any is welcome.

Slow change

Slow change often occurs when Baptists develop new imaginations of leadership. Most Baptists never have seen a woman in a pastoral role, or even preach, and so it is difficult for them to imagine what having a woman as a senior pastor might look like.

However, when other congregations potentially point to a church where—by default, in the absence of a viable male candidate—a woman was considered for a pastoral role, the very idea can spark new

consideration. The change in perspective might not happen overnight, but it could at least encourage new thought, which might lead to further study and discovery.

On the other hand, when women are only considered for pastoral roles in the absence of feasible male candidates, then this perpetuates the classification of women as substandard and inferior leaders among the community of God. Indeed, the congregation that ends up with its second choice may change its collective mind about why the second choice was not considered as a first choice. However, those who support women serving in pastoral roles cannot rely only on women as a second choice as the way to encourage new perspectives in churches.

New perspectives

Prompting new consideration of women's roles will require creativity in helping people view men and women as equal in the community of God—equal in calling, equal in gifting and equal in leadership. Rather than relying on the default, this may include intentionally offering women various kinds of leadership roles and opportunities to supply the pieces of a new imagination. Other encouragement could be found in changing gendered language about people and God in our churches, using more examples of women in our sermons and lessons, purposefully inviting conversation about women's leadership roles in small-group settings, and much more. Thousands of years of tradition cannot be changed through passive pragmatism alone.

Some churches may never be open to women pastors. Their prayerful and reflective study of Scripture may lead them to conclusions that limit women's service. And as Baptists who uphold the priesthood of all believers and local-church autonomy, we accept each church's right to make its own decisions. But for those where there is an openness to women in leadership but who have not yet taken steps to move from openness to action, we

cannot rely on the second choice. May we instead find courage to creatively encourage people to consider women as an equal first-choice to a man.

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