

# RIGHT or WRONG? Women in ministry

November 13, 2008

**I have trouble with women in ministry. A friend of mine said the practice is not new, though. I say it is. Who's right?**

Your question is challenging. If you are referring to women who have been ordained and served as pastors, your friend is correct. One of the earliest ordinations of a Baptist woman occurred in 1877 when two Michigan Freewill Baptist churches listed Lura Mains as an ordained minister. Later, she organized and served as pastor of a Freewill Baptist church in Branch County, Mich. The first ordination of a Northern Baptist (now American Baptist) woman, May Jones, took place in 1882. Within Southern Baptist circles, Addie Davis was the first ordained woman. Watts Street Baptist Church in Durham, N.C., ordained her in 1964, and she pastored in Vermont and Rhode Island.

In 2008, about 600 women serve as pastors or co-pastors of Baptist churches nationwide. The majority are affiliated with the American Baptist Churches, USA, but 11 women serve in Texas. While ordained women pastors still are a Baptist rarity, they have been around more than 130 years.

If by "women in ministry" you are referring to women who have been ordained and served in ministry positions other than the pastorate, then again your friend is correct. In the South alone, more than 2,000 Baptist women have been ordained since 1964. In 2008, the great majority are not pastors but are hospital and ministry chaplains, church staff ministers, missionaries, mission organization leaders, professors and social ministry leaders. Their ordination reflects the late 20th century trend of ordaining

ministers who serve in positions other than the pastorate.

Finally, if you are referring to women who have served in nonordained, “unofficial” (serving without a title or financial compensation) ministry roles, then your friend again is correct. Since Baptists’ inception, women have been church planters, exhorters and preachers. As early as 1640, a handful of Baptist women preached in England. Presbyterian Thomas Edwards labeled one General Baptist woman, Mrs. Attaway, “mistress of all the she-preachers on Coleman Street.” In America, Martha Stearns Marshall, beginning around 1754, prayed and preached during Baptist worship services in Virginia, North Carolina and Georgia.

So, records indicate women ministers have been around for a long time. Another reality is that many Baptists do not endorse the concept. In the 2000 Baptist Faith & Message, Southern Baptists opposed ordination of women as pastors, and the policy of the National Baptist Convention of America, the second-largest African American Baptist denomination, opposes ordaining women. As is true in other areas of Baptist life, viewpoints about women ministers are diverse.

Pamela R. Durso

Associate executive director-treasurer

Baptist History and Heritage Society, Atlanta

*Right or Wrong? is sponsored by the T.B. Maston Chair of Christian Ethics at Hardin-Simmons University’s Logsdon School of Theology. Send your questions about how to apply your faith to [btillman@hsutx.edu](mailto:btillman@hsutx.edu).*