

# Voices: Our response to the 2023 BGCT annual meeting

July 31, 2023

For decades, our congregation has experienced the power of God's Spirit present in women's pastoral leadership. God has led us to call remarkable female pastors to lead us over the last 30 years. Under their leadership we have known the power and presence of God in Christ.

Alongside that power, we have witnessed and experienced the toxic resistance faced by women leading in pastoral roles. The scenes of protestors lining our sidewalks and the need for security escorts are not quickly forgotten.

We strive to be a congregation where freedom of conscience and beloved community coexist, which is to say we honor one another's convictions and take responsibility for the weight our convictions bring to bear on each other's lives.

For as long as our church has been in existence, we have been affiliated with the Baptist General Convention of Texas, a Baptist denominational body we have understood historically both to honor and reflect a diversity of conviction regarding women's pastoral leadership in the church.

At the 2023 BGCT annual meeting, [two motions](#) came to the floor regarding women in ministry. One was brought by Meredith Stone, executive director of Baptist Women in Ministry and member of Calvary Baptist Church. The other was brought by Ellis Orozco, messenger from First Baptist Church in Richardson.

After discussion in the second business session, messengers amended and then voted to approve an amended version of Meredith Stone's motion:

*We request that the Executive Board resources BGCT staff to continue developing more strategies, resources, and advocacy initiatives to assist churches in affirming, appointing, and employing women in ministry and leadership roles.*

After learning about the actions taken at the annual meeting and reviewing subsequent news coverage, we are concerned women in pastoral leadership and their advocates were not reflected fully and fairly at the annual meeting or in subsequent news coverage.

With grace, compassion and open hearts, we are writing to offer an alternative perspective of what happened at the BGCT annual meeting and to articulate a vision of the church's bright future shaped powerfully by women's pastoral leadership.

## **A thriving future for women in ministry is free of spiritual abuse.**

During the annual meeting's Tuesday business session, one speaker equated women serving as pastors and their advocates with the serpent in Genesis 3, saying women in ministry is the clearest form of rebellion against God in the church today.

Women were told if they support loving unity in the church, they will accept their role as subordinate to men, and men may have the power to put them in positions of leadership in the church, but it will not be God's leading.

Women were told it would be "unfriendly" for the convention to affirm women in pastoral leadership, and the Bible is very clear only men can be called to pastoral leadership in the church, though this is not the case.

It was suggested those who advocate for women's pastoral leadership in

the church are not “on mission” for Jesus and are a “distraction.”

Though these statements amount to spiritual abuse, they received more robust applause than others. As hurtful words were said, women wept. No one challenged the hurtful words, but they did challenge those advocating on behalf of women called to pastoral ministry. It is wrong to use religious beliefs and Scripture to hurt, scare and control women.

Christ-followers have the sacred opportunity to profess religious beliefs, interpret Scripture and speak in such a way as to reflect the liberating presence of God and the self-giving love of Jesus Christ for the sake of fullness of life.

Faith communities among whom God calls women to pastoral leadership have a sacred opportunity to resist spiritual abuse and respond with faithfulness to the leadership of God’s Spirit in the lives of women.

## **A thriving future for women in ministry embodies leadership equity.**

The BGCT was founded in 1886 and is one of the oldest and largest surviving Baptist denominational bodies in the United States.

A woman has never preached at a BGCT annual meeting or served as the BGCT’s executive director. At the time of the 2023 annual meeting, women comprised 15 percent of the BGCT Executive Board.

As reported in the 2021 State of Women in Baptist Life [report](#) by Baptist Women in Ministry, 0.6 percent of BGCT churches have women serving as senior pastor or co-pastor, with negligible change since the first State of Women in Baptist Life report in 2005.

The BGCT gives 21 percent of state Cooperative Program contributions to

the SBC—who [firmly rejected](#) women’s pastoral leadership this summer—unless those funds are designated “Texas only.” The BGCT does not allow passthrough financial giving to other Baptist denominational bodies affirming of women in pastoral leadership.

In 2014, the BGCT closed its *women in ministry* division and several years later started a new *women’s ministry* division under complementarian leadership.

During the Tuesday business session, there were no women on the platform among leaders running the meeting. Women were not invited to participate in developing the final form of Ellis Orozco’s motion or the amendment passed by the convention.

Prior to and during the annual meeting, there were efforts behind the scenes to prevent Meredith Stone from successfully bringing her proposed motion to the business session.

During the business discussion, one messenger said approving the amended version of Meredith’s motion would allow the convention to remain “neutral” on women in ministry. The convention is not neutral on women in ministry. The convention is clear that women in pastoral leadership are not welcome or supported implicitly or explicitly by the BGCT.

Christian denominational organizations truly open to diversity of theological conviction regarding women’s pastoral leadership reflect diversity of conviction in their organizational structure and influence.

This looks like female pastors carrying equal weight and taking up equal space around the tables and on the platforms where decisions are made. It looks like reshaping systems and structures with intention, repentance and perseverance until they reflect the fullness of God’s image.

# **A thriving future for women in ministry is a thriving future for the church.**

The amended motion passed by the BGCT at the annual meeting changed three components of Meredith's proposed motion. The changes reduce accountability for the Executive Board and BGCT staff and definitively remove the language of pastor from the motion.

The amendment suggests BGCT staff are providing resources and support for women serving in all areas of church ministry, including pastor, though this is not the case. The amended motion permits BGCT staff to continue resourcing churches for women in ministry as they do currently, which is to say, toward complementarian—not egalitarian—ends.

The BGCT did not affirm women leading in pastoral roles at their annual meeting, did not stand in solidarity with sisters ousted by the SBC this summer, and has made no commitment to substantive change in its current structure or influence.

The love of Christ compels us toward a bright future in which women's pastoral gifts prepare the way of the Lord and invite fresh winds of the Spirit to fill us with new life. Data conveys when women thrive, everyone thrives the world over. We have faith that when women thrive in pastoral leadership, Christ's body—the church—will thrive.

While we hope individuals and congregations will experience the blessed joy and hope of saying "yes" when God calls women to pastoral leadership in their midst, we respect diversity of conviction and do not believe unanimity of conviction is required for partnership in Christ Jesus.

We are, however, grieved and concerned when organizational decisions

and structures hurt and diminish the personhood of God's beloved children. We do not believe the personhood of our sisters in Christ must be sacrificed to maintain diversity of conviction.

To our sisters in the BGCT who were not seen, heard and valued as a result of this year's annual meeting, we express our conviction that God can call you to serve in pastoral leadership in the church, spiritual abuse is wrong, women's leadership can carry equal weight in a space as theologically diverse as the BGCT, and God's bright future includes fullness of life and fullness of voice for you. We stand with you.

*This is a joint statement from Rev. Hannah Coe, pastor of Calvary Baptist Church in Waco, and Calvary's leadership. The views expressed are those of the authors.*