



# minister

## MAGAZINE

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## Plenty Good Room: One Woman's Story of Being a Woman in Ministry

Joan Cooper Burnett

*A gift opens doors [makes room] for a woman and brings her before the great.*

~Romans 18:16

**I**t was never my dream to become a minister, although after seeing Sister Mary Benita in her habit, as a young girl at age six I thought I would attend what appeared to be a seminary or monastery, a beautiful campus on Poplar Avenue in Memphis, Tennessee, where I believed nuns were being developed.

Well, thirty-nine years later, I found myself enrolled at Yale Divinity School as a first year student. I wasn't a Catholic nun but a divorcee after twenty-six years of marriage, a mother of two children, a grandmother, and a former businesswoman who had spent sixteen years in the corporate world and seven years as an entrepreneur. At the age of forty-five I accepted the call of God to ministry and a committed religious life. On the surface, not being bound by papal enclosures, one would think, "You are now free to move about the cabin."<sup>1</sup>

My story isn't the traditional story of a woman called to ministry. As is true for many women, my story had many turns, hurdles and barriers, but they weren't instigated by men. They were self-imposed. Please don't mistake my comment as one negating the reality of sexism in the universal church, but as a statement of experience beyond the obvious.

Many of my sisters in ministry complain about sexism and gender bias in the church, which I too have experienced, but I have found that God has a way of opening doors and making room for his daughters. My challenge wasn't the racism or sexism that I experienced; it was me.

Following my answering the call of God I accepted the leading of the Holy Spirit to attend Yale Divinity School. As a result, doors were opened - door, after door, after door. And each step of the way, I questioned my role in ministry. "I'm not a pastor," I would say; although I served as pastor of the Black Church at Yale during my second and third years of seminary, an additional year after graduation, and now four years as pastor of the First Baptist Church in Middletown, Connecticut.

I wasn't seeking pastoral leadership or any other position in the church, but the doors opened. And my prayer was, "God if this is not You, then close the door. And if it is You, then as long as the door is open, I will walk through it." I had no experience as a pastor; I was what I would call the least candidate. But God, who is the giver of gifts, "has set before us an open door and no one can shut it." (Rev. 3:8) Yes, there will be numerous attempts by people, both males and females, to do so. But we are only limited by our own mindset and attitudes. I'm not suggesting that the barriers are not real, but that God is greater.

For the last four years, I've served as the first African-American senior pastor in a traditional Anglo American Baptist Church that denies it has become multiracial, multiethnic, and mutigenerational. Prior to my accepting the

position, I was told that one of the fears of calling me as pastor was that “the church might become black - and if I wanted to go to a black church I would do so.”

Some might suggest that I was a fool to go there, but remember my prayer? God never shut that door. So for four years, through many pains and toils, hundreds of sermons preached, Bible studies taught, and prayer meetings held, some people clung to their old tactics, racist attitudes, and bad ways. But so did I! Even after watching lives changed, the homeless secure housing, the least of these fed, the naked clothed and marks made on the lives of others, I continued to say, “I’m not a pastor.”

I sabotaged my own success by allowing a title to become a barrier as I waited for the next move of God. Oh, by no means was it a cushy, peaches and cream job, but I experienced some joyous moments. I learned from so many and witnessed the extraordinary good work of God through my God-given effort, vision and commitment. Doors opened for me to meet people through that church I otherwise would not have known.

I officiated at a celebrity wedding. Although exciting, it wasn’t my greatest joy. But the wedding I performed for the young homeless couple who found their way to the church door for assistance was; they moved from a broken condition, mentally and socially, to strength, one that allowed them to care for themselves and one another. And then, they married.

We never know why we are commissioned to take the journey we are given, but we are to make the very best of every opportunity, jump over every hurdle, and do the work of the gospel, building the kingdom. It’s not what others say about you; it’s what you say about yourself. It’s not who withholds the pulpit from you, it’s seeing the doors that are open. It’s not waiting to be affirmed by people, it’s accepting the affirmation of who God has made you and called you to be, a special calling with gifts that can only be issued by God through the Holy Spirit.

Yes, we need and desire the support of our brothers in ministry, but I suggest “there is plenty good room.” You have been given a gift, a treasure lying within you, that opens the way for the Giver to usher you and God’s glory into the presence of great people. You are a multifaceted jewel, with many sides yet to be discovered, a treasure you are to be proud of, with gifts to give. Be willing to see what God has for the future.

Now you are free, Woman of God, to move about the cabin.

<sup>1</sup> Southwest Airlines

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## The Ministers Council Provides a Community for its Members:

- To assume responsibility for the faithful practice of the ministerial calling;
- To develop and promote ethical standards that both guide and shape the way in which the vocation of ministry is performed;
- To assume personal responsibility for and to encourage physical and emotional well-being in the practice of ministry;
- To inform, support and encourage one another in the deepening of personal and communal spiritual life;
- To work together to develop the skills necessary to become effective servants of Christ’s church
- To encourage growing friendships that inform and correct the leader as she or he seeks to faithfully respond to the call of God in Christ Jesus.



Photo Credit: Michael Saylor

# THE COVENANT AND CODE OF ETHICS

## for Ministerial Leaders of American Baptist Churches

**H**aving accepted God's call to leadership in Christ's Church, I covenant with God to serve Christ and the Church with, the help of the holy spirit, to deepen my obedience to the Two Great Commandments: to love the Lord our God with all my heart, soul, mind and strength, and to love my neighbor as myself.

In affirmation of this commitment, I will abide by the Code of Ethics of the Ministers Council of the American Baptist Churches and I will faithfully support its purposes and ideals. As further affirmation of my commitment, I covenant with my colleagues in ministry that we will hold one another accountable for fulfillment of all the public actions set forth in our Code of Ethics.

I will hold in trust the traditions and practices of our American Baptist Churches; I will not accept a position in the American Baptist family unless I am in accord with those traditions and practices; nor will I use my influence to alienate my congregation/constituents or any part thereof from its relationship and support of the denomination. If my convictions change, I will resign my position.

I will respect and recognize the variety of calls to ministry among my American Baptist colleagues, and other Christians.

I will seek to support all colleagues in ministry by building constructive relationships wherever I serve, both with the staff where I work and with colleagues in neighboring churches.

I will advocate adequate compensation for my profession. I will help lay persons and colleagues to understand that ministerial leaders should not expect or require fees for pastoral services from constituents they serve, when these constituents are helping pay their salaries.

I will not seek personal favors or discounts on the basis of my ministerial status.

I will maintain a disciplined ministry in such ways as keeping hours of prayers and devotion, endeavoring to maintain wholesome family relationships, sexual integrity, financial responsibility, regularly engaging in educational and recreational activities for ministerial and personal development. I will seek to maintain good health habits.

I will recognize my primary obligation to the church or employing group to which I have been called, and will accept added responsibilities only if they do not interfere with the overall effectiveness of my ministry.

I will personally and publicly support my colleagues who experience discrimination on the basis of gender, race, ethnicity, age, marital status, national origin, physical impairment or disability.

I will not proselytize from other Christian churches.

I will, upon my resignation or retirement, sever my ministerial leadership relations with my former constituents, and will not make ministerial contacts in the field of another ministerial leader without his/her request and/or consent.

I will hold in confidence and treat as confidential communication any information provided to me with the expectation of privacy. I will not disclose such information in private or public except when, in my practice of ministry, I am convinced that the sanctity of confidentiality is outweighed by my well-founded belief that life-threatening or substantial harm will be caused.

I will not use my ministerial status, position or authority knowingly to abuse, misguide, negatively influence, manipulate, or take advantage of anyone, especially children.

I will report all instances of abuse as required by law to the appropriate agency. In any case involving persons working in ABC ministry, I will also report the circumstances to the appropriate regional and/or national denominational representative.

I will show my personal love for God as revealed in Jesus Christ in my life and ministry, as I strive together with my colleagues to preserve the dignity, maintain the discipline and promote the integrity of the vocation to which we have been called.



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Published periodically as a forum for issues and events that pertain to ministry as observed and practiced by ministerial leaders of the American Baptist Churches USA

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## mission

The Ministers Council is the professional association of ministerial leaders within the American Baptist Churches USA. We are working together to:

Connect colleagues through Together in Ministry groups and Communities of Practice

- Establish and maintain professional and ethical standards of the Christian ministry
- Give support to the members of this body and be an advocate for them in their professional relations
- Resource ministry through our web site at [www.ministerscouncil.org](http://www.ministerscouncil.org)
- Interpret the appropriate roles of professional ministerial leadership to the constituent parts of our denomination, and to our local American Baptist Churches
- Encourage the recruitment and nurture of candidates for the various church vocations
- Provide a means of expression and debate by members of this body on issues that affect the professional ministerial leadership of the American Baptist Churches USA
- Cooperate with the appropriate units of the American Baptist Churches USA in matters of mutual interest and concern, including recruitment, placement, compensation, continuing education, and counseling

## ministers council membership

You are eligible for membership if you are either

- ordained
- commissioned • a lay professional or
- a student in seminary
- eligible for inclusion in the

Directory of Professional Church Leaders of the American Baptist Churches USA and serving an American Baptist Church or auxilliary organization

- paying dues through a constituent council or to the National Office of the Ministers Council

Join the Ministers Council through your local constituent council. Contact information is posted on the web at [www.ministerscouncil.org](http://www.ministerscouncil.org) under the "Who We Are" link.



Photo Credit: Michael Saylor