



minister

MAGAZINE

A Journal of the American Baptist Ministers Council • Speaking to the Practice of Ministry

Volume XXXIII, No. 1

Published Periodically at Valley Forge, PA

Spring, 2010



Advocating for Women in Pastoral Ministry

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When I was new to Maine and looking for opportunities in pastoral ministry, a search committee member contacted me about interim work. He asked for my profile and promised to call me about an interview.

The following Sunday that entire congregation was asked to vote on whether or not they wanted a female interim. Having never met me or even seen my profile, the church was asked to vote on me! All they knew was that a woman might be interviewed for the position. That, by definition, is discrimination. I only knew it occurred because someone in the congregation told me what had happened. The man on the search committee never did call me back.

American Baptists don't like to admit that they discriminate against women ministers. They insist that discrimination laws don't apply to churches, because it's up to the local church to make their own choices for pastoral leadership...which is true. Since the choices all get made at the local church level, there is no legal recourse against people whose only sin is their reluctance to accept change. How then do we advocate for women to serve in pastoral ministry—especially when people think 'the Bible says' women should not be "permitted to teach or have authority over men" (1 Timothy 2:12)?

I came to Maine in 2000 without a call to serve anywhere. This was after 23 years of effective pastoral ministry. But we had to live somewhere, and my husband found work here, so we came. It wasn't long before Phyllis Chaffee heard about the Commissioned Woman Interim program and put me in touch with Howard Washburn in Valley Forge. CWI was a collaborative effort undertaken by Interim Ministries-ABC, ABWIM, and MMBB.

The idea was to place a woman in a church seeking an interim pastor and also to have her serve as an Advocate for Women in Ministry for that region; there had to be less than 6% women pastors in that region for it to qualify. Al Fletcher, Executive Minister, was supportive from the beginning; he did, however, warn me that my strategy as an advocate would have to speak to evangelical Christians from their own perspective. I was accepted by FBC, Gardiner, as their interim pastor—based on the premise that, as an interim, they didn't have to keep me.

During my two years as ABCOM's Commissioned Woman Interim I developed a watchcare group for women preparing for ministry—women who had heard God call, but were encountering a mixture of tentative support and outright animosity. Just having the encouragement of a woman pastor propelled them to keep trying. Then the church in Gardiner called a new pastor and I moved back into the limbo of waiting for the next call to materialize. I was sick and tired of people telling me they didn't "believe in" women ministers, "because the Bible tells me so."

Meanwhile, I discovered a woman named Junia in a booklet about God calling women into ministry written by David Scholer. Junia is the notable female apostle Paul mentions in Romans 16:7. Somehow I had never noticed her in the Bible before! (It turns out her name was probably given a masculine ending back in the 12th century.) I

had been out of seminary long enough to have missed out on the amazing scholarship being done by evangelical women scholars who were my contemporaries. I began reading every book I could find about the Biblical passages concerning women and ministry. After all, it wasn't fair to expect good, Bible-believing Baptists to support women in ministry if there wasn't any biblical foundation for it! I was sure there was, but I had to figure out how to work through the knotty problems created by Paul's convoluted arguments on the subject of women, not to mention 1 Timothy 2:12!

The Spirit led me to write Junia: A Bible Study and Storytelling Resource, which was published by Interim Ministries-ABC in 2003 and can still be purchased from their website. The Junia resource provides a respected evangelical way of reading the troublesome passages that many use to exclude women from ministry. As I wrote, obstacles arose. Often my breakthroughs came by looking into the meaning of problem words in Greek or Hebrew and discovering that the English translation conveyed a different meaning than was originally intended. Sometimes reading a passage without recognizing the historical and cultural context in which it was written leads to misunderstanding. And when biblical misunderstanding bolsters what people want to believe anyway, the Bible gets the credit for justifying their prejudice.

Becoming biblically informed about the women in ministry issue is a crucial part of advocating for women who serve in that capacity. As long as there are people in local churches who believe what they hear from many conservative pulpits about women in ministry, doors will remain closed. Even if only one church member is opposed, the rest may not speak up on women's behalf, in part because they would rather avoid conflict, but also because most people (including pastors) don't know how to justify it biblically. Shouldn't we all be biblically informed?

The biggest stumbling block for women trying to enter pastoral ministry is at the local church level. Thus it is imperative that we counter-balance this resistance with some very intentional efforts at the regional and national levels. American Baptist Churches of Maine has a policy that clearly supports women in ministry. Having the policy means women's profiles must be included in every pastoral search. Just because churches don't want a woman pastor is no excuse; they are given women's profiles along with the men's.

In one very genuine struggle an ABCOM church was having, whether or not to ordain a woman they had licensed and encouraged, it was this policy that helped tip the balance. Even though not everyone in the church agreed it was "biblical" to ordain her, they decided that because their church was American Baptist, and Ameri-

can Baptists do believe in the ordination of women, they would vote to recommend her. The policy helped; every region should have one like it.

The Committee on Ministry in each region also serves an important gate-keeping function. Of course they need to treat women candidates for ordination just as they treat men—with full equality. But they also need to hold male candidates for ministry to a high standard that is consistent with the American Baptist policy concerning women in ministry. All candidates should be asked about their position on this matter.

If someone holds a position that is inconsistent with American Baptist policy the members of the Committee on Ministry should not just squirm in their seats. They should confront him, and even delay the candidacy process, until he engages in a study of the topic and is able to present an interpretation of scripture in support of women ministers. Even if he doesn't agree theologically, he should be prepared to offer a choice of responsible interpretations to those to he serves.

A Committee on Ministry should ask all pastors serving American Baptist Churches in its region to subscribe to and sign the Ministers Council Covenant and Code of Ethics. By doing so, we all agree to "personally and publicly support [our] colleagues who experience discrimination on the basis of gender, race, ethnicity, age, marital status, national origin, physical impairment or disability." The Committee must also make it clear that we expect one another to "seek to support all colleagues in ministry by building constructive relationship wherever [we] serve, both with the staff where [we] work and with colleagues in neighboring churches."

Men who don't believe in women ministers will be serving side by side with them in this denomination. It is up to each Committee on Ministry to communicate that while they may honor one's right to hold a different theological position, they still expect candidates to respect their colleagues in ministry. This means it is not OK to say a prayer in your clergy cluster asking God to please "remove this woman from among us." (This actually happened in Maine!) It will continue to happen as long as our male colleagues allow such "theological" attitudes to take precedence over the ethical obligations we all agree to uphold as American Baptist ministers.

Advocacy is everyone's job in a time of radical change. But isn't that what God is always about—radical change? Women ministers are not exactly new; but it's radical, because women ministers go back to our Christian roots.

*See, I am doing a new thing!
Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?
I am making a way in the desert
and streams in the wasteland. - Isaiah 43:19*

God calls both women and men to serve in ministry. It's the good news a lot of people still don't want to hear, but God is still calling.

Susan Crane is the Pastor of Henderson Memorial Baptist Church in Farmington, Maine. She continues to volunteer as the Advocate for Women in Ministry for ABCOM.

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 Ministers Council is that Unique Place within the National Structure of the ABCUSA which:

- Offers leaders opportunities to articulate a distinct ministerial viewpoint, among the many denominational perspectives that need to be voiced and heard, as we work together for the growth of Christ's kingdom;
- Serves as an advocate for its members in times of difficulty and conflict;
- Is solely focused on the well-being of clergy as they engage in the ministerial calling in all of its dimensions.

www.ministerscouncil.org

THE COVENANT AND CODE OF ETHICS

for Ministerial Leaders of American Baptist Churches

Having 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
- 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 under the "Who We Are" link.



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