



# minister

## MAGAZINE

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## A Journey in Ministry

Soozi Whitten Ford



The vote to extend a call to me for my first pastoral position was less than unanimous. As I discussed it with the senior pastor and the search committee chairperson, their interpretation was that some in the congregation were feeling the economic strain caused by the recent downturn in the local economy.

That was 1987, not 2009 or 2010, in an area quite accustomed to periodic boom and bust cycles arising from the demand for the state's abundant natural resources. In short, they thought that a few people felt the church simply could not afford a second full time pastor at that time. Trusting their interpretation of the situation, and feeling strongly led, we moved our family anyway and settled into our ministry positions, eager to see how God would guide our steps in this beautiful location.

While my husband managed the nearby ABC camp and planted a new ABC church some 50 miles away, I threw myself into the life of the congregation. Christian education and youth ministry were significant responsibilities, but I also invested time in building relationships and caring for people by visiting in homes, the hospital, and in their places of employment. I was young and quite naïve, and over the course of my time there I said and did more than my fair share of stupid things. In spite of it all, this congregation provided consistent love and care as I grew in my own understanding of myself as a pastor.

Eleven years later I announced my resignation approximately one month in advance. Eileen\*, an older woman with whom I had enjoyed a particularly warm relationship, invited me to visit her "one last time." As we sat on her lovely patio and sipped iced tea, she took a deep breath and, with tears in her eyes, confessed, "Pastor Soozi, when the church voted to call you, I voted 'no.' Yes, I was afraid we couldn't really afford another pastor at that time. But the real reason was because you were a woman. And more than a thousand times since that day, I have wanted to take back my vote."

Eileen continued, "I simply did not understand how a woman could be called by God to be a pastor, and certainly not in my church. But you came to us anyway. Then you visited me in the hospital and held my hand while you prayed. You helped me when my Emil\* was so sick, and you said such wonderful things at his funeral. I really love it when you pray and I get so much out of your sermons. Pastor Soozi, you have been my pastor from the very beginning, and I can't imagine it any other way."

Since 1999, I have served as a regional staff minister and I carry that experience with me every day. Like many others, our region works hard to encourage and affirm women in all forms of ministry, lay and pastoral. Does every church agree with this emphasis? Hardly. Should we be more proactive in providing biblical support for women in ministry? Probably. Could we do more to lift up God's call of women in ministry? Absolutely. I have listened to people whose perspective differs from my own and know that some base their views on interpretation of scripture. Far more, however, have confided that they held a similar view until they began to experience women serving in roles in neutral non-church settings. Those included positions such as hospital or military chaplains, spiritual retreat lead-

ers, or officiants at memorial services for friends or family members.

Eileen's world at that time had not allowed her to experience the ministry of a woman in a similarly neutral setting nor in the life of her own congregation. She would not have been inclined to attend a series of Bible studies and discussions, such as *Junia* (available through ABC Interim Ministries), designed to explore the testimony of women in scripture. Quite simply, Eileen became receptive because one particular woman in ministry was present with her during some very difficult seasons in her life.

Likewise, my world in the earliest years of my ministerial journey did not include a wide range of experiences. I had (and still have) a lot to learn. I was present with this congregation and they were also present with me, allowing themselves to be used by God to guide my formative process. Over the course of more than a decade together we disciplined one another, and now we are both better equipped to serve others in Jesus' name.

*\*Not their real names*

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*Soozi Whitten Ford is privileged to serve as the Associate Executive Minister for Mid-American Baptist Churches, and as Stewardship Facilitator with Mission Resource Development, American Baptist Churches USA. She is a member of First Baptist Church of Indianola, IA, where her husband, Homer, is the pastor.*

## 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](http://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

Editor: Michael Saylor

Associate Editor: Sue Sechrist

Publisher: Joe Kutter and the

Ministers Council Communications Committee

Contact:

The Ministers Council

PO Box 851

Valley Forge, PA 19482-0851

Phone: 1 • 800 • 222-3872 ext 2333, 2334

Fax: 610 • 768-2066

Signed letters and comments are welcome, and may be used for publication. Send to [www.pastor@firstbaptist-cs.org](mailto:www.pastor@firstbaptist-cs.org). Please include your return and email addresses in any correspondence.

## 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