

Changing Hands:

The Practice of Ordaining Baptist Women



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The struggle to respond to God's call when other believers opposed that response has been a continual struggle for women.

—Carolyn Blevins¹

Across five decades Baptist hands are changing the ways they confer roles and authority for ministry through ordination. Baptists have responded to many social and theological factors, yet one change stands above the others in its significance and impact. When a Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) church first ordained a woman to ministry in 1964 the practices, processes, and meanings of ordination took new directions. This essay surveys Baptist women's ordination as novelty, controversy, shifting process, and contested symbol in Baptist life.

Ordination is one of three formal authorizing practices for ministry. Along with theological education and a stated call to ministry, ordination serves to gather social, spiritual, and theological authority to the person of the minister for his or her public work on behalf of the church. Ordination is both a ritualized event and a well-traveled gateway to the larger, meaning-laden practice of formal or professional ministry.

For centuries women served the church with little or no authorization. When asked why they are, or are not, or are not *yet* ordained, women

offer important clues about the changing practice of ordination. The Baptist Women in Ministry (BWIM) Registry is a databank of women's ordinations and professional ministry collected since 2007. Of the 1,032 entries, approximately one-third are from women serving as professional ministers, or seminarians, without ordination (yet), and two-thirds are women reporting their ordinations. Following a brief overview of historical context, women's stories will illustrate the changing process, meanings, and empirical realities of Baptist ordination.²

Baptist Ordination in Historical Context

Historian William Brackney says that from their birth in seventeenth-century England, Baptists cherished both freedom and order, and so organized themselves into "associations" of neighboring churches that could agree doctrinally and cooperate in the work of benevolence, missions, education, and so on. The associations often played a role in ordination, making judgments about the doctrinal soundness of ministers, giving counsel as pastors moved from church to church, and guarding churches from the dangers of fraudulent ministers and those ill-suited to the work. At the same time, associational ordination could prevent ministers caught in disagreements with their congregations from losing their credentials and support.³

Between 1845 and 1945, Baptists affiliated with the SBC ordained men for ministry in a process that was not uniform, but relatively consistent within a range of variations. The practice included the following basic elements:⁴

- identifying the (male) candidate for ministry, usually through a stated call and recognition of spiritual gifts
- gathering an ordination council or presbytery
- examining the candidate
- voting to recommend ordination (or not)
- holding an ordination ceremony or service, including prayer and laying on hands.

One variation to these basic elements was determining *when* a minister might be ordained: after declaring a call to ministry; following formal education and/or a trial period of ministry, which might include a "license"

to preach; or when a congregation invited a minister to serve. Another regular variation related to who should examine a candidate: a council of neighborhood ministers, a committee of pastors from the Baptist association, or a presbytery of ministers and ordained deacons and/or non-ordained lay people. The examination usually included questions about the potential minister's conversion experience, calling to ministry, doctrinal beliefs, and/or pastoral skills. The ceremonies conferring ordinations and laying on hands varied extensively depending on region, worship style, and congregational customs.⁵

Following World War II a new professional ministry ideal and expansion of theological education blossomed in the United States. Despite a stated commitment to the priesthood of all believers, Baptists largely equated Christian ministry with the pastorate. The professional ideal and specialization of ministry roles inspired Baptists to extend ordained ministry to include more educators, musicians, counselors, chaplains, and age-level specialists. Increasingly Baptist colleges and seminaries, as well as the SBC itself, expanded and embraced the professional ideal for an educated and ordained ministry.⁶

Within what historian Bill J. Leonard calls the “ever evolving tension between local church autonomy and associational cooperation,” Baptists questioned, debated, and discerned women's ordination. By the 1970s, Baptist women were attending seminary in greater numbers, serving as chaplains and educators, and also declaring their calls to pastoral ministry. The questions became an occasion for Southern Baptists—and those who departed the mother denomination—to consider more intentionally the process and meaning of ordination.⁷

Ordination as Novelty

Freewill, American (ABC-USA), and British Baptists ordained women in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. However, no Southern Baptist church ordained a woman until 1964 when the Watts Street Baptist Church in Durham, North Carolina, ordained Addie Davis. Warren Carr, pastor at Watts Street, chaired her examination council for the Yates Baptist Association. In a close reading of her story, historian Curtis Freeman observes that Davis' ordination was a communal exercise in seeking new light from scripture for the mission of the church.⁸

For several decades sociologist Sarah Frances Anders tracked Baptist women's ordinations. Picking up on Anders' work in 2007, Pamela Durso and I launched the BWIM Registry to collect names of women in ministry, ordained and not (yet) ordained. That year we estimated around 2,000 ordinations of Baptist women by SBC congregations and churches that broke away from the denomination after the 1980s. Since 2008, Durso has collected another 296 names of ordained women, bringing our estimate to 2,350. Beginning in 2007 the registry collected 1,032 records:

- 629 ordained clergywomen
- 355 unordained ministers and seminarians
- 47 guests/proxies registering for others

Nearly all participants reported connections with the SBC, Cooperative Baptist Fellowship (CBF), Alliance of Baptists, Baptist General Association of Virginia (BGAV), and/or Baptist General Convention of Texas (BGCT). A small number of women reported affiliations with historic black Baptist denominations and ABC-USA churches.⁹

Many ordained women (168) provided additional information about their ordinations, including these novelties:

- first ordination in a church and/or association
- first woman to serve as pastor of a church in a state
- first woman to be ordained with a spouse

For example, Naomi Adkins Brown reports that she was both the first woman licensed in 2005 and ordained in 2008 at Mount Zion Baptist Church in Joliet, Illinois, by Isaac Singleton, pastor of Mount Zion for forty-seven years. The Baptist "firsts" were part of larger U.S. church trends in women's seminary enrollment, ordination, and professional ministry service. However, those trends never took hold fully in the SBC. Women's ordination remained a perpetual novelty and disputed issue, contributing to the denominational split and birth of new Baptist groups.¹⁰

Ordination as Controversy

In 1984 and again in 2000 the controversy over women's ordination crystallized in official statements of the SBC. However, ordination itself remains a mainly local practice. In 1991 Charles Lumpkin recalls that his spouse Vicki Lumpkin "was the first woman to be ordained by Potomac Baptist Association (Virginia), and the open associational council swelled with those that did not want a woman (any woman) ordained. However, the council also swelled with those that knew her and wished her ordination. She was recommended for ordination by a comfortable majority." Other associational conflicts did not end so well, becoming embroiled in controversy and making news headlines as Southern Baptists marched toward schism. Kathy Manis Findley says that in 1993 both her "home church in Little Rock and the Arkansas Baptist State Convention exploded" over her request for ordination after four years of hospital chaplaincy. The controversy gave birth to Providence Baptist Church, which called Findley as its pastor.¹¹

Of the 355 women in the BWIM registry not (yet) ordained, 250 replied with the following reasons for the lack thereof:

- Ministry does not require ordination (61 %).
- The right circumstances are not yet available (41 %).
- I support women's ordination, but feel uncomfortable with it for myself (10%).
- I anticipate ordination after seminary.
- Miscellaneous: controversy with pastors and churches, family complications, complex discernment processes

For example, when Rev. A's childhood church ordained her, she felt support from most members, but a small group left the church in protest of her ordination, including deacons who "raised" her and served on her ordination council. Another woman said that "Ordination has been available to me, but since my husband is an ordained minister, I have felt that it might hinder any future doors in Southern Baptist churches that God might open for him." Often controversies about women's ordination are intertwined with weighty, complex, and sometimes lengthy periods of discernment.

Ordination as Shifting Process

The ordination process for women generally follows the same sequence as the one settled with Baptists by 1945. The following variations in the process are noteworthy:

- the length of time from call to ordination
- simultaneous ordination with spouses
- (non)involvement of associations
- the level and type of discernment by churches

Many women reported waiting years or decades to receive ordination. When Adalene Dixon was ordained at New Hope Missionary Baptist Church in Penney Farms, Florida, in 2006, she was not only the first woman ordained: she had been ministering for fifteen years already. A Tulsa church licensed Susan Stephenson in 1982, but “couldn’t bring themselves to take the leap to ordination.” First Baptist Church in Oklahoma City finally ordained her twenty years later. Another woman’s ordination “ran into complications” right after seminary in 1976. She was finally ordained in 2001 by a church she served for more than a decade. One effect of ordination coming at the end of a career is a shift in meaning from hopeful anticipation to acknowledgement and affirmation of ministry well done.¹²

In the BWIM Registry at least sixteen women reported being ordained on the same day as their spouses. When Betty Anne and Sam Schlegel were ordained together in 1976, she was the first woman ordained by First Baptist Church of Crystal River, Florida. The couple’s seminary professor, Henlee Barnette, advised them to seek ordination as “the more biblical thing to do” in the church that called them. They did not include the Marion Baptist Association. Instead the church’s pastor, L. B. Thomason, chaired an examination council made up of former pastors and seminary professors.¹³

The shifting involvement with local Baptist associations seems connected to (potential) controversies and new patterns for convening a council. In 1997 Anita Thompson and her pastor Dr. Jesse Croom knew that the bylaws of First Baptist Church in Ahoskie, North Carolina, allowed them to “form their own ordination council or work through the local association.” They decided to test the “normal route” with the West Chowan Baptist Association to see if it might refuse to “examine a female candidate.”

Thompson recalls: "Thankfully, the associational ordination council was wonderfully accepting." However, she remains the only woman ordained by that association.¹⁴

In the BWIM Registry, 599 women report a location for their ordination. Of those, only 31 (5.2%) record a Baptist association taking part in the ordination. Of the associational ordinations, 21 are in Virginia and North Carolina, four are in ABC-USA contexts, and six are in other states. The involvement of local Baptist associations in the ordination process is minimal in this pool of reports. Without comparative data I can observe tentatively that stories and data in the BWIM Registry suggest the locus of ordination is shifting away from associations and to churches and ad hoc committees convened by churches that include ministers, deacons, and seminary professors.¹⁵

A loss of associational involvement in ordinations could potentially compromise the safeguards for churches and ministers against fraud and doctrinal irregularities. However, connectionahsm among progressive Baptists (who ordain women) is increasingly built around affinity groups that are not geographically proximate. The connecting points are social and mobile as well as theological and practical, changing the ways ministry knowledge and safety are communicated and guarded. Less associational involvement might also hinder the careful and wide-ranging discernment that Freeman identifies as essential for ordination. A number of churches, including my own, have responded to this concern by extending the process up to a year for discerning ordination (rather than a two-hour examination council). Other changes to the ceremony include a growing number of female-led ordinations and more full-congregational participation in laying hands on new ministers.¹⁶

Ordination as Contested Symbol

The full impact of Baptist women's ordination on Baptist identity and meaning-making is beyond the scope of this brief survey. To ordination as novelty, controversy, reversal from anticipation to affirmation, we can add two more issues.

First, as I have argued elsewhere, during the SBC schism women's ordination took on a contested symbolic function. To biblicist-conservatives, ordained women are cultural symbols of all that is troubling in Baptist life and with humanity. Thus women seeking ordination are symbols of a violation

of God's "delegated order" in families, ministry, and society (God the head of man, man the head of women, parents the head of children, etc.). To autonomist-progressive Baptists, ordained women are symbols of "freedom and autonomy" and upheld as positive examples of God's incarnational presence and calling. These views turn women's ordination into a clash of cultural symbols, signifying conflict and contention. The clash also reflects ongoing sexism in the Baptist lifeworld in which ordination is practiced¹⁷

Finally, women's ordination is a signpost for shifting denominational affiliations. In the BWIM Registry, women reported that 47 percent of ordaining congregations were primarily affiliated with CBF, and 64 percent of them had a CBF connection. Only 22 percent of ordaining churches held a primary affiliation with the SBC, but 48 percent affiliated with the SBC in some way. The clergywomen, however, identified themselves more with the progressive groups: CBF 77 percent, Alliance of Baptists 23 percent, ABC-USA 15 percent, BGAV 10 percent, and BGCT 8 percent. Fewer than 10 percent of the ordained women in the registry personally identify with the SBC.

As Carolyn Blevins observed, the struggle for women called by God continues, and many women serve with authorization from their calling and education, yet without being ordained. However, the struggle is also one of labor with God, giving birth to new meanings, affiliations, and processes for the practice of ordination and opening the gateway to empowered ministry. **BH&HS**

Notes

1 Carolyn D Blevins, *Women's Place in Baptist Life* (Nashville, TN: Baptist History and Heritage Society, 2003), 15

2 E Brooks Holifield draws on Max Weber's designations of three forms of authority for ministry: rational authority (special skills and knowledge), charisma of office (ordination), and charisma of person (divine call). See *God's Ambassadors: A History of the Christian Clergy in America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 1-3. The initial data from 617 entries to the BWIM Registry was reported in Eileen R. Campbell-Reed and Pamela R. Durso, "The State of Women in Baptist Life, 2006" in *No Longer Ignored: A Collection of Articles on Baptist Women*, ed. Charles W. Deweese and Pamela R. Durso (Atlanta: Baptist History and Heritage Society, 2007), 280-84. This essay utilizes data from the BWIM Registry (www.bwim.info) including 400-plus additional entries as of 1 December 2015.

3 William H. Brackney, "Philadelphia's Great Contribution to Baptist Life and Thought," *American Baptist Quarterly* 27.1 (January 2008): 15-16, 21; Bill J. Leonard, "Baptist Associations in the South," *American Baptist Quarterly* 27.1 (January 2008): 27-31; John E. Steely, "Ministerial Certification in Southern Baptist History: Ordination," *Baptist History and Heritage* 15.1 (January 1980): 23-29, 61.

4 G Thomas Halbrooks, "The Meaning and Significance of Ordination Among Southern Baptists, 1845-1945," *Baptist History and Heritage* 23 3 (July 1988) 24-32 See also Bill J Leonard, "Ordination, Baptist Views" in *Dictionary of Baptists in America*, Bill J Leonard, ed (Downers Grove, IL InterVarsity Press, 1994), 213-14

5 Lee N Allen, "Methods and Procedures of Ordination among Southern Baptists, 1845-1945," *Baptist History and Heritage* 23 3 (July 1988) 33-41 See also Leonard, "Ordination, Baptist Views "

6 Holfield, *God's Ambassadors*, 231-34 See also Glenn T Miller, *Piety and Profession American Protestant Theological Education 1870 1970* (Grand Rapids Eerdmans, 2007), 678-705, for a discussion of the mid-twentieth-century ideals for seminary education

7 Leonard, "Baptist Associations in the South," 27, Steely, "Ministerial Certification," 29, 61 See also Brackney, "Philadelphia's Great Contribution," 14-22 I argue the latter point in Eileen R Campbell-Reed, *Anatomy of a Schism How Clergywomen's Narratives Reinterpret the Fracturing of the Southern Baptist Convention* (Knoxville University of Tennessee Press, 2016)

8 Pamela R Durso, "She-Preachers, Bossy Women, and Children of the Devil A History of Baptist Women Ministers and Ordination," *Review and Expositor*, 110 1 (Winter 2013) 33-47, Ruth M B Gouldbourne, "Reinventing the Wheel Women and Ministry in English Baptist Life" (Oxford Whitley Publications, 1997), and Curtis W Freeman, *Contesting Catholicity Theology for Other Baptists* (Waco, TX Baylor University Press, 2015), ch 7

9 Sarah Frances Anders, "Historical Record-Keeping Essential for WIM," *Folio A Newsletter for Baptist Women in Ministry* 15 2 (Fall 1997) 6 Anders identified 1,225 ordinations of Southern Baptist women Eileen R Campbell-Reed and Pamela R Durso, *State of Women in Baptist Life 2007* (Atlanta Baptist Women in Ministry, 2008), 11 In 2012 Durso estimated 2,200 ordinations in "She-Preachers," 42 Durso email to author, 12 December 2015 Durso maintains lists of women's ordinations and women pastors of Baptist churches

10 Beginning with Naomi Adkins Brown, all quotes come from the BWIM Registry, unless otherwise indicated See Eileen R Campbell-Reed, "Baptists in Tension The Status of Women's Leadership and Ministry, 2012," *Review and Expositor* 110 1 (Winter 2013) 49-64

11 Wilburn T Stancil, "Divergent Views and Practices of Ordination among Southern Baptists Since 1945," *Baptist History and Heritage* 23 3 (July 1988) 42-49 Stancil recounts early examples of associations dismissing churches that ordained or called women as pastors, based on the 1984 Kansas City Resolution on ordination See also *The Baptist Faith and Message, 2000* and accompanying report at <http://www.sbc.net/bfm2000/bfm2000.asp>, accessed 1 December 2015 Kathy Manis Findley, "This is My Story " in *Folio*, 11 4 (Spring 1994) 7

12 See also Campbell-Reed, *Anatomy of a Schism*, ch 1, for the story of Anna who waited a dozen years for ordination while ministering fulltime

13 For more stories of women's ordination, the influence of seminary, and the role of professors in their call and the ordination processes, see Jennifer Harris Dault, ed, *The Modern Magnificat Women Responding to the Call of God* (Macon, GA Nurturing Faith Inc), 2012

14 Email from Anita Thompson to author regarding her singular status as ordained by the West Chowan Association, 17 December 2015

15 The Registry asks for "Church or Association " Some women may have omitted vital information about associational involvement We can wonder how many churches that have departed the SBC are less involved with their associations at all A fascinating project awaits someone willing to read associational records for patterns of change in ordinations over the last fifty years

16 Leonard, "Baptist Associations in the South," 30, suggests a new "de facto associationalism" that is ecumenical, ranging across "multiple states and regions" and sharing "common ideological, social, or missional concerns " See also Campbell-Reed, *Anatomy of a Schism*, in which Chloc's narrative (ch 5) recounts a long-term discernment process for ordination

17 Campbell-Reed, *Anatomy of a Schism*, ch 1