

## **The Adaptive Challenge : Women In Ministry**

Committees seeking pastoral leadership in American Baptist Churches continue to overwhelmingly select male candidates over female candidates. The result is that many qualified, seminary educated, and ordained women are unable to find opportunities of service within our churches. Their vocational calling goes unfulfilled and their gifts are lost to the ABC/USA.

### **Rationale**

This Adaptive Challenge statement runs counter to our self-perception as American Baptists. We tend to believe that we resolved this “issue” decades ago. We readily ordain women, and our denominational statements and documents claim that we support and welcome their leadership. But Area Ministers and clergy women, especially ethnic minorities and those outside of large metropolitan areas, see a very different reality. The decentralized structure of ABC/USA makes it difficult, if not impossible, to cite the number of American Baptist women who have heard a call to ministry and completed training, but been unable to find a position. The journey from seminary to church placement is uncharted and unmonitored in our system. It is also difficult to quantify those who struggle with underemployment, and/or lengthy gaps between positions. However, after decades during which 30% – 50% of seminary graduates have been female, a task force of the Ministers Council in 2011 found that only 10–12% of the pastoral leaders of our churches are women.

Our Adaptive Challenge Team has concluded that the barrier to women’s leadership in the churches persists primarily within Search Committees who are hesitant to present a woman candidate to their congregation. Some refuse to consider any women candidates from the outset, assuming that women either cannot or should not be pastors. But the problem is not only with those who articulate theological opposition to women’s leadership in the church. The preference for male pastors is very deep-seated, even among those who profess support for women in ministry. Thus the adaptive challenge we face is to change behavior, not just beliefs. This tendency to select male pastors is held in place by some very powerful forces. We confess that we are all, along with our society, captive to the “principality” of patriarchy. Our culture has been so deeply shaped for centuries by the presumption of male power and privilege, that we often do not even recognize when our own behavior is influenced by it.

This challenge is a crucial one for the vitality of American Baptist Churches. To turn away women leaders is to close ourselves off to the particular perspectives, insights and approaches only they can offer. A fuller, more multifaceted Gospel is preached and taught when women’s voices are included. If we really do believe that the Holy Spirit is calling women into ministry, then we are blocking the very work of God in sending us the leadership we so desperately need.

What can be done to help churches examine their attitudes toward women as pastors and move toward becoming more equal opportunity employers? How do we influence and change the decisions of hundreds of autonomous search committees in widely varied settings across our denomination? That is the challenge before us.

