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“ . . .As a result  
of their spiritual  
revolution, Second  
Baptist diverted  
from over a  
century of  
precluding women  
clergy to become  
a church where  
leadership and  
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callings on  
talented female  
members. ”

**THE STRUCTURE OF A  
SPIRITUAL REVOLUTION**  
Black Baptists and Women in Ministry

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*A significant body of empirical studies shows the relationship between support for women clergy and denominational affiliation, but few analyze how pulpit discourse influences congregants' support or disapproval of women clergy. Gender inequality among clergy is partly attributable to cultural values resident in local congregations; hence, studying how religious elites craft narratives concerning gender and ordination helps us understand the mechanisms involved in moving women into ecclesiastical authority. This article delineates how a new senior pastor's liberal preaching and female clerical appointment helped Second Baptist transform into an internal system of support for women to exercise ministerial leadership and spiritual gifts. This article demonstrates the role of leadership, discourse, symbols, and mentoring in producing more women clergy and shaping the beliefs and values of the congregation.*

**Keywords:** *black Baptists; women clergy; African American religion; congregational study; gender and ordination*

A recent trend in ethnographic studies investigates how religious elites utilize cultural tools to reinforce or revolutionize collective behavior in African American churches. Pattillo-McCoy (1998) depicted how clergy use religious rituals as cultural tools for facilitating activism among African Americans. Harris (2001) displayed how black preachers reinforce political activism in churches by using scriptures to link collective action and divine guidance. Cavendish (2001) showed how the new priest of a black Catholic church used preaching to mobilize members for antidrug marches. Lee (2003) discussed how public discourse instigated a black Baptist church's rapid change from social conservatism to political activism. This article delineates how a new senior pastor used cultural tools from his liberal seminary experience to craft a new collective narrative concerning women clergy at Second Baptist Church of Evanston.

Before Hycel Taylor's pastoral appointment in 1972, Second Baptist had not ordained a woman in its hundred-plus-year history. Taylor's predecessor did not even allow women to stand behind the pulpit to address the congregation. But after Taylor arrived, his liberal preaching and appointment of a female assistant pastor sparked a spiritual revolution that resulted in over twenty women receiving ordination for full-

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time ministry. Members that were once staunchly opposed to female clerics eventually embraced women in spiritual leadership during Taylor's tenure. Deacons that were initially unsympathetic to their first female assistant pastor soon became her biggest supporters, and lay members learned to function as gatekeepers of God's calling to female congregants that displayed ministerial gifts. Women also joined the deacon and trustee boards, positions of great power in Baptist churches, and continued to function as leaders in the church.

This article delineates how the strong leadership of their new senior pastor and female assistant pastor helped Second Baptist Church of Evanston transform into a free space for women to exercise ministerial leadership and spiritual gifts. It is first important to contextualize Second Baptist's transformation by briefly discussing the preclusion of women clergy among black Baptists in general. Second Baptist's embrace of women clergy controverts a longstanding rejection of women clergy in black Baptist conventions.

### **BLACK BAPTISTS AND WOMEN CLERGY**

Social constructions are often the products of power relations rather than neutral negotiations among collective actors of equal social standing (Morris and Braine 2001). Women pursuing clerical appointments are denied access, face severe restrictions, and often experience prejudice, discrimination, and humiliation in many denominations and churches (Baer 1993; Lehman 1993). Even in denominations with active affirmative action policies, female pastors are overrepresented in smaller congregations and have fewer opportunities for full-time employment (Nesbitt 1993; Konieczny and Chaves 2000). While female-led congregations are more prevalent among African American than white or Hispanic congregations (Konieczny and Chaves 2000), men monopolize positions of religious leadership in most African American mainline denominations, forcing women to pursue leadership in sectarian movements (Baer 1993) or in groups with no mainline denominational ties (Konieczny and Chaves 2000).

Black Baptist congregations reproduce gender inequality through clerical assignments. Lincoln and Mamiya's (1990) national study reported only three black Baptist churches with women senior pastors, whereas Riley (1999) named six churches. None of the mainline black

Baptist conventions officially endorse the ordination of women—partly due to their respect for church autonomy and partly due to their often vocalized disapproval of women clergy. Lincoln and Mamiya (1990) found that almost 74 percent of pastors in the largest black Baptist convention disapproved of women clergy.

Though Higginbotham (1993) depicted women's auxiliaries as vehicles of power in Baptist networks, Morris and Lee (forthcoming) emphasized that significant power rests in the governing boards of Baptist conventions that are predominantly composed of male pastors. Like Higginbotham, Gilkes (1997, 375) also discussed how female leadership is mediated through informal networks of support and empowerment in local churches, but conceded that women are organized under a "system of relatively unyielding male authority" within most Baptist churches and conventions. Women are not allowed to preach behind pulpits in many black Baptist churches nationwide (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990) and are frequently denied the respect allocated to their male counterparts (Morris and Lee forthcoming). Hence, to be a female seeking ordination and respect among mainline black Baptist conventions is still a lonely and difficult task (Chapman 1996), as most Baptist churches and networks remain hostile environments for women clergy.

While sociologists study the forces behind the acceptance or rejection of women clergy on a denominational level (Lehman 1985; Nesbitt 1993; Chaves 1997; Gilkes 1994, 1997; Sullins 2000), few have approached the latter with congregational studies. Gender inequality among clergy is a result of embedded cultural values particularly resident in local congregations (Sullins 2000), and therefore, studying how religious elites craft narratives concerning gender and ordination is vitally important for deciphering the mechanisms involved in moving women into ecclesiastical authority.

## METHOD AND SETTING

Second Baptist is a popular church in Evanston, a small city north of Chicago, with over a thousand members; the overwhelming majority are African American. A significant portion of the membership consists of businesspersons, judges, lawyers, professors, doctors, and influential politicians, including the current mayor of Evanston. President Bill Clinton, Oprah Winfrey, Gwendolyn Brooks, Congressman

John Conyers, and Jessie Jackson are a few of the many politicians and celebrities that have spoken from Second Baptist's pulpit and many others have made visits.

I first learned of Second Baptist while working on a national study of black Baptists. A Chicago pastor's description of Second Baptist as a refuge for women clergy prompted my interest because I was aware that most black Baptist churches are unsupportive of women clergy. In my first few visits, I learned that women were active leaders in the church as assistant pastor, ministers, deacons, and trustees. I later discovered that Second Baptist was not always supportive of women clergy but underwent several changes after Dr. Hycel Taylor was appointed senior pastor. The latter discovery impelled me to study how Second Baptist changed to embrace women clerical leadership.

The senior pastor, Hycel Taylor, granted permission to study the congregation, introduced me to the congregation during a Sunday service, and provided a two-hour interview and many conversations about his tenure at the church. Members were very supportive, and I did not encounter resistance during any part of the study. Part of the lack of resistance is explained by Second Baptist's location five blocks away from Northwestern University. Members were accustomed to graduate students and professors visiting and studying the church, and thus, my presence did not seem unusual. Another contributing factor to members' support of my study involves Second Baptist as a middle-class congregation with a strong appreciation of higher education. Many members were impressed with my connection to Northwestern University—an institution with tremendous cache in Evanston—and offered to help the study in any way possible.

Data come from a year of participant observation at Second Baptist. During this period, I visited worship services, Bible studies, and special events and interacted with a significant amount of clergy and members. Field notes were taken after every visitation. Data also come from thirty-five in-depth, open-ended interviews with members of the church that ranged from thirty minutes to two hours. Though these interviews were important sources for my knowledge of historical developments that preceded my arrival, numerous conversations with longtime members during participant observation were equally vital. The interviews and participant observation provided opportunity to explore the before-and-after process of their acceptance of women clergy.

My approach for choosing interview subjects was from a careful snowball process of meeting new prospects through previous contacts as well as through visiting different Sunday school classes and church functions that exposed me to diverse members. Because I was interested in historical changes, my sample was skewed toward longtime members. Twenty of my interview subjects were members at Second Baptist before Taylor's arrival; four of these longtime members were deacons, and two were trustees before and during Taylor's tenure. Of the total sample of interviews, eighteen were with women, four of which are former members who accepted the call to ministry at Second Baptist and were ordained by Taylor. My sample has other subjects that were/are active in various dimensions of spiritual life at Second Baptist, including the current chair of the deacon board, the youth director, past and present members of the women's auxiliary, choir members, and the secretary of the church's programming committee. Data collected through participant observation and interviews allowed me to analyze beliefs about women in ministry before, during, and after Second Baptist's spiritual revolution from the perspectives of representatives that participated in various dimensions of the church.

Though Second Baptist is somewhat of a transient church, both my interviews and field notes confirmed that a large contingent of the church remained active after Hycel Taylor's arrival and new initiatives. The latter is important to demonstrate that Second Baptist's spiritual revolution did not derive exclusively from disgruntled members' leaving and new members' joining. Although Second Baptist continued to gain and lose members gradually to death and relocation, Taylor's liberal preaching and new initiatives did not cause a significant loss of membership, and the church has a visible contingent of long-term members still active in leadership.

The names of members quoted in the text are pseudonyms with the exception of the well-known pastors Brenda Little and Hycel Taylor. Second Baptist is a high-profile church, and it would be futile to substitute names for the church and Taylor and Little. The latter consented to their names' being used in the study, and Taylor provided written consent for the use of the church's name in publications. I should also mention that I never became a member of Second Baptist and that my interest in visiting was strictly sociological. References in this article to women in Second Baptist "receiving God's calling" do not reflect my theology but echo Second Baptist members' penchant for associating ecclesiastical authority with a divine calling.

## SECOND BAPTIST'S SPIRITUAL REVOLUTION

We are aware that God has chosen us to be pioneers in the liberation of African-American women to be preachers, prophets, and priests. We know that in so doing we participate in the liberation of the church in general, and the black Baptist church in particular, from the bondage and ignorance of chauvinism.

—Rev. Dr. Hycel B. Taylor (Spring Revival bulletin, 2000)

A few years ago, Second Baptist Church of Evanston's senior pastor Hycel B. Taylor and two ministers visited First Corinthian Baptist Church in North Chicago for a special service. Rev. Taylor—the guest speaker—and the two ministers walked into First Corinthian and convened with other clergy in the pulpit area. What made their act controversial was the fact that the two ministers that accompanied Taylor were women and hence violated First Corinthian Baptist Church's strict policy precluding women from occupying clerical space. Ten minutes after their arrival, the pastor of First Corinthian demanded that the female ministers leave the section designated for clergy and sit with the lay audience. Taylor capitulated but not before having his say:

This is not man's pulpit! This is God's pulpit and God does not discriminate! If these women are not good enough to stand up here, I am not good enough to stand up here. (Riley 1999, 1)

Sacred space is laden with symbolic meaning in countless churches to perpetuate male clerical hegemony. A prominent Baptist pastor in Chicago claimed that he does not even allow women behind his pulpit to clean it (Morris and Lee forthcoming). To enforce norms against women's functioning as clergy, many black Baptist churches forbid women access to space on stage behind the pulpit area that is generally designated for clergy. Women clergy from Second Baptist are often forced to sit with lay members when visiting other Baptist churches, while their male counterparts sit with clergy. Years ago, Second Baptist also did not allow women to occupy clerical space but changed to become a refuge for clergywomen, and the catalyst for their spiritual revolution was its appointment of Dr. Hycel B. Taylor as senior pastor in 1972.



Before Taylor's tenure, Second Baptist was led by Pastor Nathaniel Hawk. A longtime trustee described Hawk's leadership as "the old-fashioned style of pastoring." No women functioned as ministers, deacons, or trustees during Hawk's long tenure. Evon Davis, a longtime member of Second Baptist, described women in ministry under Hawk as a nonissue because there were neither women ministers nor women striving to function in church leadership. Ernestine Guillebeaux mentioned that it was not even a topic of discussion during Hawk's tenure, because most members did not believe God called women to ministry. Vincent Ransom, a trustee under both Hawk and Taylor stated, "Pastor Hawk expressed that it was the man that was the minister."

Pastor Hawk never allowed women to sit in the pulpit area designated for ministers, and so congregants were unaccustomed to seeing women speak from behind the pulpit. But Second Baptist abolished such gender norms after the church appointed a new senior pastor, Dr. Hycel B Taylor, in 1972. Taylor's liberal preaching and appointment of a female assistant pastor contributed to Second Baptist's transforming into a free space for women clergy.

### **PRELIMINARY FACTORS FOR CHANGE**

Several preliminary factors prepared the church for change under Taylor's new leadership. For one, old age played an integral role in forcing Nathaniel Hawk's retirement, thus fracturing their institutional world and bringing the need for new leadership:

What we wanted to do was to give [Hawk] a reception and let him resign and he could be pastor emeritus if he wanted to continue at the church but he didn't want that so they had a meeting and they voted him out. It was unfortunate it had to be that way but he had gotten a little on the senile side and it was difficult to deal with. (Reynolds interview)

Preaching constructs shared meaning and group cohesion, and Hawk's preaching perpetuated male clerical hegemony, so his removal opened the door for new pulpit discourse.

Another factor is that with its location in Evanston, Second Baptist maintained a high proliferation of educated members as a middle-class church. Several large corporate offices are located north of Chicago, and Second Baptist for a long time has attracted African American

executives looking for a middle-class congregation. Consequently, it was not surprising that members were enthralled by the prestige of Hycel Taylor's faculty position at Northwestern University, as discussed by a member:

Second Baptist has been a middle-class church since I have been there and I think back from the early days a lot of people have had some kind of formal education. So I think the church was impressed with his professorship status. (Field notes)

Second Baptist's capitulation to Taylor's demands—including a reduced schedule and summers off—demonstrated their enthusiasm for him to be their pastor, which provided important leverage to circumvent potential resistance to new ideas. Taylor's popularity impeded early political confrontations with the deacons and trustees who were initially unsympathetic to some of his new ideas, and thus, Taylor had a considerable amount of room to navigate his new leadership. An educated and professional laity also may have fashioned Second Baptist with a proclivity toward Taylor's progressive preaching, as a longtime member discussed:

If [Taylor] were in a highly rural or traditional kind of place it might have been a whole lot different. But we're [near] metropolitan Chicago, we're in a university community, a lot of people have college degrees and beyond. The city of Evanston was ready, the people of Second Baptist were ready and I think it was just a match at that time. (Brown interview)

A third preliminary factor involves the rise of black consciousness in Evanston during the years that preceded Taylor's arrival. The assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968 provoked unrest in over a hundred cities, and the Chicago area was no exception. A few months after King's death, Northwestern students worked with African Americans in Evanston to protest racial inequality at the University by conducting sit-ins. Unrest at Northwestern University combined with the Black Power movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s to produce a progressive climate and rise of black consciousness in Evanston. Taylor became pastor at Second Baptist as an active participant in the civil rights movement, and his revolutionary style resonated with many members:

At that time I was much more radical than I am now: I was a young radical, I had a giant beard and wore those dark glasses and dashikis [*laughs*]. That's what we so-called black radicals out there did. (Taylor interview)

Taylor arrived at his new church merging his Christian existentialism from his seminary experience with radical activism to construct a new vision for the church by preaching a message of black liberation and freedom, as a longtime member discussed:

People were ready for his message of empowerment; his message of "you are able to do anything that you want to do and you can do it" and that kind of thing. He uses the term "The Church of Faith and Freedom" and the point of being completely free; free to make your own decisions, free to conquer the world, free to be your own person; "There are no chains that can bind me now" kind of message and I think the fact that he was able to proclaim it so vehemently, people were very open to that. (Brown interview)

The rise of black consciousness in Evanston provided a climate more apt for black Christians to challenge the status quo. Taylor's message of faith and freedom resonated with a growing radicalism in Evanston that caused middle-class Second Baptist members to reevaluate what it meant to be black and Christian.

The latter discussion demonstrated how Second Baptist's demographics, its vacuum in leadership, and the cultural changes in Evanston helped prepare members for Taylor's new leadership, progressive preaching, and liberal ideas. It is now important to briefly discuss how Taylor's seminary experience influenced him to become a supporter of women clergy. This demonstrates the vital impact of professional socialization on the theological and political orientations of clergy, who in turn influence their congregations.

### **TAYLOR'S PROFESSIONAL SOCIALIZATION**

Taylor's seminary experience played a major role in shaping his theological worldview. Taylor studied at Oberlin during the period it merged with Vanderbilt University's seminary:

The theology of the seminary at that time was very much German theology. The existentialist theologians dominated the life of seminaries, in particular the seminaries of universities. So you were reading Tillich and Niebuhr, and Karl Barth. These theologians were writing out of the milieu of Germany and the Nazi regime; we were reading Dietrich Bonhoeffer, all of the existentialist philosophers. (Taylor interview)

Vanderbilt's approach to doing theology was analytical and critical, different from the Fundamentalist approach at Baptist or Evangelical seminaries:

My major theologian was Paul Tillich. You were dealing more with philosophical theologians who were in search for the very essence and quintessence of religion. So dogma and doctrine, though they were there, they were always subject to great criticism. (Taylor interview)

Reading Tillich emancipated Taylor from engaging in doctrinal quarrels concerning women in ministry by providing an existential vision of Christianity that emphasized freedom. The latter influenced Taylor's pastoral ministry to be more committed to the existential concerns of his congregation rather than a Fundamentalist observance of doctrinal tenants:

I learned that church is a means to an end, the Bible is a means to an end, but if you don't know what the end is then you fall in love with the means and you lose total sight of what the end is supposed to be. I now feel there is something behind the church, the liturgy, the choir singing, preaching; there's a spiritual dimension that these things are supposed to help us to reunite and reconcile ourselves. (Taylor interview)

Swidler (2001) contended that people's strategies of action influence the kind of goals they pursue instead of the other way around. Taylor's seminary experience discouraged him from preaching expository sermons on Biblical themes emphasized by many of his Baptist colleagues. It was in seminary where Taylor developed his sensitivity to challenge aspects of culture and tradition that impede Christians' freedom. This existentialist vision was the fulcrum for Taylor's early decision to add the subtitle "The Church of Faith and Freedom" to Second Baptist's name as a consistent theme to permeate the church:

There is a freedom that I think many of us have gained growing up through Second Baptist and that is this attitude of expectation that we can be free to do anything we want; and that has caused dissonance in a couple of ways when we interact with other Baptists. (Phillips interview)

In Taylor's first years at Second Baptist, his sermons reflected the liberal ideas he learned in seminary and set the stage for transformation:

In many ways Dr. Taylor got us ready for change; not only in political activism, but in supporting women preachers too. He just kept hitting us with that "Church of Faith and Freedom Theme"—he had it in our bulletins, flyers, or whatever we did as a church. He just kept preaching freedom and I think many of us bought into that way of thinking even before Rev. Little came. (Wilson interview)

Whereas his predecessor's old-fashioned preaching inspired and reinforced members' prejudice against women clergy, Taylor crafted an existential narrative that prepared the congregation for moving women into ecclesiastical authority.

After seven years of emphasizing faith and freedom, Taylor's decision to ordain and appoint Brenda Little as Second Baptist's first woman cleric was as vital to the church's transformation as was his liberal preaching. Scores of women would eventually accept God's calling to preach after seeing Brenda Little function as assistant pastor. It is now worthwhile to discuss her role as Second Baptist's pioneer and provocateur for women in ministry.

## **BRENDA LITTLE AND SECOND BAPTIST**

Brenda Little grew up in Chaplain, Illinois, a small city about 135 miles south of Chicago. At the age of sixteen, Little perceived a very vivid calling from God to the ministry. This epiphany occurred in the late 1950s, a time when female preachers among black Baptists were scarce:

I had never seen a woman in the pulpit all of my sixteen years of being involved in that church and all of my role models were men. So when I came to my aunt and said, God has called me to preach, there was fear on her face. She let me know that she really was glad for me but she was also

afraid and she said, "Baptists do not believe in women preachers so you better keep your mouth closed about that." (Little interview)

Little received no encouragement from her church concerning a future in ministry and consequently abdicated her call to ministry and became a registered nurse in Chicago.

Years later, after advancing in her nursing career, Little had another significant religious experience during a civil rights speech that pointed her back to her ministerial calling:

I could just hear Martin Luther King Jr. saying "If you have not found anything worth dying for then you have not found anything worth living for," and I knew that I had not really gone ahead with what God had called me to do. (Little interview)

King's speech prompted Little to pursue seminary training. Her seminary experience became difficult when she could not find a black Baptist church in Chicago to accept her internship as a minister. After being rejected by several churches, Little came to Second Baptist in her third year of seminary because she believed that Taylor's liberal preaching indicated he would be accepting of women clergy. (Little interview)

Little's calculation that Taylor would support her was correct, and she completed her internship at Second Baptist in 1978. Her first assignments were to administrate the Sunday school, accompany Taylor in the pulpit area, read scriptures, and offer prayer during services. A year later, Taylor decided that Little was ready to be the first woman ordained in Second Baptist's hundred-plus-year history. Taylor reflected on his decision to ordain a woman:

To ordain a female was not that difficult for me; it was more difficult for the female than it was for me. I never have reservations about doing what I believe was right. I may have some problems, but no reservations. When I decided to ordain Brenda she asked me, "should we inform the church and have some classes to prepare them for this?" I said, "no, did the Lord call you?" She said "yes"; then I said, "Why inquire the church?" [*laughs*] And that was that. See when you act with that kind of "ex cathedra" authority there's usually nobody to get in your way. (Taylor interview)

After her ordination in June of 1979, Taylor immediately appointed Little as assistant pastor, and she became Second Baptist's first female cleric, a position she held until leaving Second Baptist to accept a senior pastorate at Bethany Baptist Church of Evanston in 1986.

Little's ordination and seven-year tenure as assistant pastor was vital to Second Baptist's transformation to embrace women clergy in several ways. For one, although Taylor had been a vocal advocate for women in ministry, he had not yet ordained a woman. By requesting to do her internship at Second Baptist, Little tested Taylor's existentialism to see if it was merely theoretical or truly foundational to his spiritual vision. Taylor's immediate acceptance and support of Little provided an application of Second Baptist's new theme as "The Church of Faith and Freedom." Taylor's pastoral appointment of Little also provided a crucial test to his authority. Even though some members were apprehensive, no one attempted to impede Taylor's decision. A standoff by either the trustee or the deacon board could have impeded Taylor's existential vision and foreshadowed resistance to future initiatives. Notwithstanding the latter reasons, I will now discuss how Brenda Little's internship and clerical appointment was significant to Second Baptist's spiritual revolution because of her role as Second Baptist's first clergywoman.

### EARLY RESISTANCE AND CHANGE

The experiential commensurability of a perspective or worldview represents whether the experience of participants provides a proclivity toward accepting or rejecting the perspective or worldview (Snow and Benford 1988). Brenda Little's internship and clerical appointment represented the first time a woman occupied clerical space and thus challenged the symbolic use of space that reinforced male clerical hegemony. This allowed congregants to experience the ministerial gifts of a female for the first time:

Interviewer: Who was the first woman that you remember giving a sermon at Second Baptist?

Guillebeaux: Rev. Little. It had to be twenty-five years ago.

Interviewer: How did it make you feel?

Guillebeaux: It was strange to me because all I had known were men preachers. But I thought she did well and they gave her a chance and the people really liked it.

Additional interviewees confirmed that Little's internship and assistant pastorate provided numerous longtime members their first experiences of being preached to and prayed for by a woman pastor.

Some members were initially uneasy about Little's appointment because it went against Second Baptist's long history of patriarchal leadership and many members' Biblical worldview concerning gender roles. Though a few left the church and others expired, most traditionalists were won over shortly after experiencing Little's ministerial gifts despite initial reservations. Here is an example of how Little's ministry activity caused a member to reconsider her original stance, which was against women's functioning in spiritual leadership:

Williams: I was very much not into accepting women in leadership roles in the church. I had been brainwashed that number one, women didn't preach; and number two, women definitely didn't pastor if they had the audacity to preach.

Interviewer: When did you stop being uncomfortable?

Williams: The Lord changed me because it was obvious to me that Rev. Little was anointed by God and it was obvious to me through her own personal progress and her testimony in her preaching that the Lord had done this to her. It was through opportunities for her to minister where you actually saw God behind it and that kind of verified her calling. Most people were convinced by her and her presence and the fact that she truly was called by God and can present herself in that way.

A similar experience occurred with some members of the deacon board, the legislative branch with authority under the church's bylaws to challenge pastoral leadership. Though none of them officially protested, some had preliminary reservations about women in ministry, as a longtime deacon discussed:

Ransom: The old deacons didn't think so much of a lady being a minister. They thought a man should be the person. Of course, that changed.

Interviewer: How?

Ransom: The old deacons gave Rev. Little a hard time but as time went on they began to melt. Rev. Little was strong and sturdy but a very wonderful woman.



Greta Wilson discussed how her late husband was among the disgruntled deacons that felt the Bible does not sanction women ministers but later changed to support Little:

It didn't take long for him to come around and believe it or not he eventually enjoyed Rev. Little's preaching more than Dr. Taylor because she preached from the word a little bit more. Years later when Rev. Little interviewed at Bethany, my husband and Charlie gave Rev. Little great recommendations and she became Bethany's first female senior pastor. It really touched my heart when Charlie cried during Rev. Little's last day at Second Baptist because he gave her so much grief in her first year. (Wilson interview)

Charlie Johnson admitted that he and a few deacons initially showed disrespect by calling her "Little Brenda" and intentionally falling asleep during her first few sermons. But Johnson also admitted that "Rev. Little preached the word, making it impossible for us to deny God's calling on her life." George Franklin, a member of the trustee board, discussed how he grumbled when Little first began to sit alongside Taylor, but later relented after Little visited him in the hospital. Brenda Little also confirmed that seeing her in ministry helped quickly garner the support of most reluctant deacons:

Some of the deacons gave me some stress at first. Basically I would say that they were won over and those older deacons became my greatest supporters. I did what God had called me to do: I preached the gospel, I taught bible study, I visited the sick, I served communion, I baptized, I evangelized, I ministered to people, I counseled, and when they had that confidence that I was able to do all of those things they became my greatest supporters. (Little interview)

Hence, occupying clerical space and fulfilling ministerial duties normally completed by male clergy had a powerful effect on resistant members' perspective on women clergy. Brenda Little's ministerial duties provided experiential commensurability for a supportive perspective on women in ministry.

## **SECOND BAPTIST AS FREE SPACE FOR WOMEN CLERGY**

What heightened Little's impact was the fact that Taylor took summer vacations during her early years at Second Baptist, placing her at the helm of executive leadership for three months:

There was a time when Dr. Taylor would be gone the entire summer. The day that school let out, the next day he and his family were gone and they didn't return until like a week before school so the assistant pastor used to run the church in the summer. So when Rev. Little used to do that I used to assist her in getting ready for worship and was kind of like her personal assistant as a very young woman. (Howlett interview)

This quote shows how Little's presence inspired mentoring opportunities for young women like Howlett to participate in ministerial activities. Howlett represented the generation of young women socialized under Little's leadership that grew up believing God's call to ministry transcends gender. Whereas patriarchal leadership was unquestioned under Taylor's predecessor, members that grew up under Taylor and Little took for granted that God calls women to pastoral ministry, as Howlett confirmed:

I was in middle school when there were women in the pulpit at Second Baptist so I was young. As I moved into the place of accepting the call for myself, I did not have the struggle that some women have in terms of having to wrestle with whether or not God can call women. So that was not one of my struggles because I grew up there. So for me to go to a church and not see women in leadership is foreign and uncomfortable because since age ten or eleven there was always a woman at Second Baptist. (Howlett interview)

Howlett currently is an ordained minister and credits those early years under Little as crucial to recognizing her spiritual gifts and ministerial calling.

Brenda Little's presence socialized female members to believe that women can be leaders in the church. Little's seven-year experience as assistant pastor inspired greater participation from women in several leadership positions at Second Baptist:

I think more women got involved in more important places in the church under Rev. Little. Women began to take part running different departments while she was there. (Guillebeaux interview)

It was therefore no coincidence that female members of Second Baptist did not routinely answer God's call to preach before Brenda Little's arrival. Taylor and Little encouraged women to recognize their ministry potential, thus causing Second Baptist to become what movement theorists call a free space for women to exercise gifts and abilities and to discover their callings:

Dr. Taylor gave me opportunity and room within the ministry of Second Baptist to use my gifts and it was through the process of just doing what I liked to do that I discovered that I had gifts in ministry and I loved doing what I was doing and it just got to a place where I heard God saying this is what you are to be doing full-time. Just doing things in the ministry that I absolutely love, I discovered that I had the gift of being able to see a vision and pull people together to implement the vision and that's basically what I still love doing to this day. (Howlett interview)

It is important to emphasize that Howlett discovered her clerical calling after Taylor provided her numerous opportunities to minister. Howlett's ability to perceive God's calling more than likely would have been stifled in a church that prevented women from exercising ministerial gifts.

As spiritual gatekeepers, clergy nurture potential ministers toward accepting their calling from God. Taylor encouraged women toward the ministry and helped confirm their calling, as discussed by a former member who is now a cleric in a Methodist church:

Dr. Taylor told me that, "God is calling you into the ministry; you're gonna be one of those pioneer women," and I was like what is he talking about? I just could no longer deny it and I started talking with people and I met with Dr. Taylor and he gave me a lot of information on what schools to attend and just a lot of good mentoring advice. (Scott interview)

Lay members of Second Baptist also became gatekeepers of God's calling on female congregants and thus formed an internal support system

for women clergy. For example, Rose Green was young when members confirmed God's calling on her life to ministry:

There was a struggle on my part but my calling had always been affirmed by members of the congregation based on things that I would do. They would say, "Oh I know you're called to preach" and I tried to ignore that but then it came to a point that I had to accept that this was my calling in the Body of Christ. (Green interview)

The fact that Green gradually learned of her calling through church members' responses to her ministry activities demonstrates their gender-neutral perspective of God's calling. It is safe to assume that most members in other Baptist churches would not have interpreted Green's gifts and talents as indicative of a possible calling for ministry:

I think the way had been prepared for me in that Second Baptist is a church that is used to seeing women in ministry so it's not new to them to see women clergy. So they knew then and they know now how to acknowledge and recognize female clergy. (Green interview)

After Brenda Little's departure in 1986, two more women served Second Baptist as assistant pastors and many functioned as ministerial assistants. Taylor also appointed women to the deacon board—a move that is in some Baptist churches more controversial than having women preaching—as an early female deacon discussed:

See deacons are the last old-boys network. When [Taylor] first started putting women on the deacon board and he asked me to be a deacon, I told him I'd have to struggle with that, and he said, "well you're doing everything now," and teasing me he said, "you're everything except the man of one wife" [*laughs*]. So I really struggled with that but now I very much feel that God has called me for this day and time right now. (Brown interview)

Diaconal boards enjoy tremendous authority in most black Baptist churches, and Second Baptist's inclusion of women was a powerful step toward gender equality in spiritual leadership.

Once a thought style takes hold, any exception to its system initially appears unthinkable (Fleck 1935/1979). Taylor and Little helped construct a transgender norm for clergy at Second Baptist. During his

tenure, Taylor ordained over twenty females whom he refers to as “The Preaching Daughters of Second Baptist,” and Little continues to encourage female preachers in the Chicago vicinity with spiritual retreats and individual mentoring. Most of the “Preaching Daughters of Second Baptist” are now assistant pastors at other churches, some having left their Baptist origins to join other religious groups more supportive of women clergy. Whereas most Baptist churches invite a female speaker once a year for their Women’s Day celebration, Second Baptist recently devoted the entire month of September to women and invited Brenda Little and several of the “Preaching Daughters” back to offer their ministry gifts to the congregation. Taylor, who ordained and mentored all these women, was excited to have them conduct this special revival and saw this as a historic event for black Baptists in the Midwest.

## DISCUSSION

Thomas Kuhn (1962) contended that a scientific revolution causes practitioners of a new paradigm to engage in an entirely different world. Similarly, as a result of their spiritual revolution, Second Baptist diverted from over a century of precluding women clergy to become a church where leadership and laity confer divine callings on talented female members. Congregants that shared Taylor’s predecessor’s prejudice against women clergy eventually learned to embrace and support female ministers. Converts under Taylor’s tenure simply took clerical gender neutrality for granted, and many young female congregants received training for spiritual leadership at Second Baptist, which formed a deliberate system of support for women.

Before Taylor arrived, Second Baptist members never witnessed a woman preach or teach from behind their pulpit and thus lacked experiential commensurability with a transgender clerical perspective. But after seeing Brenda Little perform ministerial gifts, many members embraced a new perspective concerning the Bible and women clergy. By allowing women to sit in the pulpit area and function in tasks previously reserved for men, Taylor constructed a new symbolic use of space to support women clergy. Young members socialized under Taylor watched female ministers occupy clerical space and eventually perceived God’s calling on their lives to preach. This may indicate that congregants’ exposure to female clergy influences how likely they are

to support women in ecclesiastical leadership or to pursue a clerical calling as females.

After its spiritual revolution, Second Baptist generated a continual cycle of women pursuing ecclesiastical leadership. By functioning as a free space for women clergy, young females were able to recognize their talents by participating in ministry activities, and thus, over twenty women were ordained under Taylor's watch and now function as clergy. This suggests that along with a transgender policy for clerical leadership, active encouragement and mentoring are mechanisms behind moving more women into ecclesiastical authority. A lack of such mentoring and encouragement may explain why some denominations and churches fail to generate more women clergy in spite of having official policies that support women clergy (Lehman 1985).

Like St. Sabina's shift toward progressive activism (Cavendish 2001), Second Baptist's spiritual revolution occurred at the dawn of a new pastoral administration, thus demonstrating the susceptibility of religious institutions under new leadership. Before Taylor's arrival, there were neither women ministers nor women striving to function in church leadership at Second Baptist. Taylor arrived at a time when their institutional world had been fractured by the dismissal of their traditional pastor. Taylor's new ideas exemplified by his "Church of Faith and Freedom" theme prepared members for his clerical appointment of Brenda Little and to eventually embrace women clergy.

Through pulpit discourse, mentoring, and ministerial activity, clergy help construct gender roles in local congregations. Resembling Cavendish's (2000) hunch that a congregation's internal structure and demographics are more significant than its denominational affiliation when predicting a congregation's likelihood to engage in community activism, Second Baptist's stance on women clergy was more influenced by religious elites' support of women clergy on a congregational level than by their denominational affiliation, which is overwhelmingly unsupportive of women clergy. One may argue that internal dynamics are more predictive than denominational affiliation in Baptist churches because the autonomy of each congregation prevents denominational policies from having a binding effect. But I suspect that studies of non-autonomous congregations will also demonstrate that pastoral leadership, demographics, and internal structure are more salient in deciphering a church's policy on women clergy than denominational affiliation. This would confirm Chaves's (1997) contention that a "loose coupling"

exists between denominational decrees and congregational practices concerning women's functioning in ministerial positions.

Second Baptist's radical transformation raises several issues concerning moving more women into ecclesiastical authority. For one, it demonstrates that a church with a longstanding history of male clerical leadership can change to embrace women clergy under the right circumstances. With an educated and middle-class laity, Second Baptist showed a proclivity toward the kind of liberal thinking conducive to Taylor's new ideas. But in addition to showing that demographics and internal organization can influence a congregation's proclivity toward accepting women clergy, Second Baptist's transformation raises an important issue concerning the role professional socialization plays on clergy and lay members' perspective on gender and ecclesiastical authority. One of the neglected areas of clerical research concerns an analysis of the socialization processes that influences their doctrinal perspectives (Guth 2001), and Second Baptist's transformation demonstrates the vital impact of professional socialization on the theological orientations of clergy. Taylor's seminary experience afforded him a cultural toolkit for existential preaching that proved useful in preparing Second Baptist members to embrace a more egalitarian perspective on women clergy. The fact that Second Baptist's transformation was preceded by liberal preaching supports Chaves's (1997) contention that Fundamentalist churches are more resistant to women clergy than those that are Biblically liberal. This may indicate that the more pastors are exposed to liberal theology during professional socialization, the less likely they are to embrace a hermeneutic that precludes women from functioning as clergy. Hence, professional socialization can play a vital role in shaping the theological worldview and political attitudes of clergy and consequently the spiritual institutions they lead.

Religious elites use public discourse to craft collective narratives for theological issues. Pastors directly influence cultural values concerning ecclesiastical authority, and hopefully, this study will inspire more ethnographers to analyze the relationship between pulpit discourse and congregational perspectives on women clergy. More ethnographic studies should test my hunch that a congregation with clergy socialized in liberal seminaries, public discourse that affirms women functioning in church leadership, and/or women already functioning ministerial activities among congregants, is considerably more likely to maintain a laity that affirms women in ministry and, in return, to reproduce more

clergywomen than those congregations without such conditions. Additional work should compare mentoring and support networks for women clergy in churches that vary in success at generating more women clergy. Black Baptists and their responses to the profusion of women's seeking clerical assignments provide intriguing arenas for sociological analysis of the politics involved with the social construction of gender in spiritual institutions.

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