

Church drops woman Sunday school teacher: Cites biblical passage prohibiting women from teaching men

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An American Baptist church in Watertown, New York, has dismissed an 81-year-old female adult Sunday school teacher, citing a biblical passage that prohibits women from teaching men.

Timothy LaBouf, pastor of First Baptist Church, said in a statement that “based on the consistent teaching of scripture,” both men and women have roles within the church, but women are barred from teaching men.

The church’s board of deacons mailed a letter August 9 announcing the decision to Mary Lambert, who had taught an adult Sunday school class for 11 years. The letter quoted 1 Timothy 12: “I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent.”

After the dismissal made national news, LaBouf said that the decision to remove Lambert was “multifaceted” and did not solely rest on scriptural interpretation. He cited a lawsuit that Lambert had threatened in May. According to LaBouf, the lawsuit—later dismissed—said that each new member should be scrutinized before joining the church. The membership has risen from 18 to 200 members since LaBouf was hired as pastor two years ago.

LaBouf said legal counsel advised that the deacon board stick to arguments with an ecclesiastical basis rather than cite other issues to avoid possible slander. Lambert, a church member for 54 years, has publicly criticized the decision, saying her dismissal came without warning.

LaBouf said, “I believe that God has a special role for both men and women within the church setting. I don’t believe that those special roles make one more inferior than the other. . . . And I believe that that ends at the church.”

Though other Baptist churches in the area have disagreed with LaBouf’s decision, the Watertown church is shielded by its local autonomy. “I would say that the majority of our churches would not affirm this particular choice,” said William Carlsen, executive minister for American Baptist Churches of New York. —*Religion News Service*