

'Female pastors' story rattles SBC nerves: Magazines removed from shelves

by [John Dart](#) in the [October 21, 2008](#) issue

When Lutherans recently celebrated 50 years of ordaining women as pastors in Sweden, they invited Katharine Jefferts Schori, the first woman presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church, to speak at festive events in Uppsala and Stockholm.

In Nashville, 60 women pastors who lead United Methodist churches with 1,000 or more members discussed in mid-September how to convince more large congregations that female clergy are talented leaders, too. The UMC has ordained women for 52 years, but only 5 percent of them head sizable churches.

A recent issue of a moderate-oriented Cooperative Baptist Fellowship magazine has a cover story on female pastors, reflecting the fact that the CBF now has 100 women ministers, including some serving at churches dually aligned with the CBF and the Southern Baptist Convention. The editor received only a half-dozen complaints.

But a sharp reminder that most Southern Baptist churches and institutions are staunch opponents of women clergy arose when the nondenominational magazine *Gospel Today* published its September-October issue. It features five successful women pastors—who pose, smiling, on the cover. Bookstores affiliated with the SBC removed the magazine from their shelves.

Founder-editor Teresa Hairston said she learned before Labor Day that LifeWay Christian Bookstores—“one of our largest outlets,” she said—had opted not to display the issue in more than 100 stores. An anonymous e-mailer first informed her of the situation, complaining that the stores had treated it “like it was pornography.”

Hairston said in a telephone interview on September 24 that she had had no response from LifeWay officials after she left voice mail messages weeks earlier seeking an explanation.

“We’ve had overwhelming support from people who are appalled that this has happened,” she said. “We totally respect those churches who feel they must oppose women clergy, but we wanted to have a story that told of the great work with churches and families” done by the featured pastors, she said.

The five “powerful” female pastors pictured are Tamara Bennett of This Is Pentecost Ministries in Sacramento, Claudette Copeland of New Creation Christian Fellowship in San Antonio, Bishop Millicent Hunter of the Baptist Worship Center in Philadelphia, Kimberly Ray of Church on the Rock in Matteson, Illinois, and Sheryl Brady of The River in Durham, North Carolina.

The LifeWay action drew caustic comments from Southern Baptist pastor and blogger Wade Burleson, who cited an Associated Press article on the controversy.

“The idea that a conservative, evangelical magazine might actually say something about women pastors that will cause Southern Baptists to stumble morally . . . is actually laughable,” Burleson said.

Burleson wrote that he agreed with the SBC prohibition on women pastors, “but we are acting like a ‘cult’ if we think we need to shield ourselves (and others) from this ‘immorality.’”

A LifeWay spokesperson, Chris Turner, gave AP news service a short rationale for removing the issue from display. “The buyers said the statements that were in [the magazine] took positions that were contrary to what we would say,” Turner said. “It wasn’t so much that there were women on the cover.”

Burleson, a pastor in Enid, Oklahoma, who often needles SBC officials, asked September 24 on his blog, “Is it possible that the word ‘buyers’ is in fact code for certain SBC leaders who called and complained?”

Gospel Today editor Hairston, who began her Atlanta-based publication in 1989 as a Christian music newsletter called the *Gospel Score*, said her full-color Christian lifestyle magazine has a readership of as many as 250,000.

“The article was not intended to create controversy; it was journalistic coverage of a trend,” she said.

Hairston said she thought it hypocritical of SBC leaders to show enthusiastic support for Alaska governor Sarah Palin as the Republican nominee for vice president and

“not have this same open-mindedness about successful women pastors” in other churches.

The smaller CBF magazine coincidentally has a September-October cover headlining female pastors. The issue features a photograph of Pastor Julie Pennington-Russell in front of Decatur (Georgia) First Baptist Church, one of the largest Baptist congregations led by a woman pastor, and contains photos of more than two dozen women clergy and thumbnail sketches of them and their ministries.

CBF executive coordinator Daniel Vestal is quoted in the issue as saying he believes that it is “God’s will for more churches to call gifted and Spirit-led women as pastors.”

Editor Lance Wallace said the CBF magazine goes to about 42,000 people. About six people have objected—“They weren’t nasty”—and an equal number praised the issue, he said.

Wallace said that he hoped “to demystify” the subject by showing examples of women leaders serving in Baptist churches and ministries.

The CBF was formed in the wake of the conservative resurgence in SBC leadership in the 1980s.