

Moderate Baptist church calls second woman pastor: A Cooperative Baptist Fellowship congregation

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A North Carolina Baptist church has called its second woman pastor—an act that is still rare among Baptist moderates, despite the fact that virtually all moderate and progressive Baptist institutions support women’s eligibility for the ministry.

Providence Baptist Church in Hendersonville, North Carolina, voted unanimously May 3 to call Julie Merritt Lee as pastor. Lee, who will take the pastoral reins following the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship General Assembly in July, says she is excited about her call.

Many female ministers in moderate Baptist life run into a stained-glass ceiling blocking them from the role of senior pastor. Providence Baptist Church is an exception. It has had a woman as its lead pastor from the start.

Gail Coulter was assistant pastor at First Baptist Church in Asheville, North Carolina, before becoming Providence’s first pastor in 2002. The church sought membership in the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina, but decided to affiliate nationally with the CBF instead of the Southern Baptist Convention.

That decision, coupled with the calling of a woman as pastor, didn’t sit well with some conservatives. Two local Baptist associations refused to accept the church.

The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of North Carolina and five CBF-related churches stepped up to help sponsor the new congregation. Coulter, who served a term as CBF moderator, retired from the pastorate in 2008.

Lee, a 2005 graduate of Baylor University’s George W. Truett Theological Seminary, has been serving as a pastoral resident at Wilshire Baptist Church in Dallas. Wilshire began its residency program in 2002 for the purpose of preparing future ministers for moderate Baptist churches.

Funded by a Lilly grant, the Transition into Ministry program [see the February 24 Century] gives recent seminary and divinity school graduates two years of practical ministry experience and learning in real-life ministry situations.

George Mason, senior pastor at CBF-affiliated Wilshire Baptist, said Providence Baptist is making a good choice. "Julie is a gifted and capable pastor," Mason said, adding that Providence is "pointing toward the day when churches think of competence before gender." -*Associated Baptist Press*