

Historic Riverside Church to vote on woman as senior minister

by [Sarah Pulliam Bailey](#) in the [May 28, 2014](#) issue

Amy Butler is poised to become the seventh senior minister and the first woman to lead the famed Riverside Church in Manhattan. Butler has been senior minister of Calvary Baptist Church in Washington, D.C., for 11 years. The church has about 300 members with an estimated 150 people in attendance on Sunday mornings.

When she arrived at Calvary, she inherited a church that had dwindled from 5,000 parishioners to about 70 on a Sunday. As pastor, she pushed the downtown church to be more multicultural and oversaw a massive redevelopment of the church's downtown property.

Under Butler's leadership, Calvary Baptist voted in 2012 to dissociate from the Southern Baptist Convention, citing concerns over the SBC's commitment to the separation of church and state and allowing local churches to make their own decisions. Calvary, for example, is open to gays and lesbians in leadership.

"Under her leadership the church has become an influential congregation in the nation's capital, and she has become a much sought-after voice for Progressive Christianity," Riverside's search committee said in a letter to the congregation.

If approved, Butler would join two other women who have been appointed to senior leadership at significant mainline congregations.

Shannon Johnson Kershner began senior pastoral duties in May at Chicago's Fourth Presbyterian Church, where *Century* editor-publisher John M. Buchanan served as senior pastor before retiring from that post in 2012. Kershner's academic studies and pastorates have been in southern states. She described her previous congregation in Montreat, North Carolina, as having members from "all over the theological, social, and economic spectrum." She is a strategist in the NEXT Church movement in the PCUSA for what she called "honest conversation about what might be next for our denomination."

Ginger Gaines-Cirelli was appointed February 8 as senior pastor of Foundry United Methodist Church in Washington, D.C. As the senior pastor at Capitol Hill UMC, she

helped weekly worship attendance grow by 62 percent over four years. She has also held positions focused on younger adults and youth. Her husband, Anthony, is a Roman Catholic scholar who works at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in Washington.

The towering Riverside Church, built by tycoon John D. Rockefeller Jr. in Manhattan's Morning Side Heights in 1927, is an interdenominational church affiliated with the United Church of Christ and the American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A. Its pulpit has been home to some of the most influential clergy in progressive Protestantism, including Harry Emerson Fosdick, William Sloane Coffin Jr., and James Forbes Jr.

Forbes, who was the first black senior minister of the church, has led Riverside during the transition as a minister emeritus.

Butler was introduced to the Riverside congregation on May 4. The congregation will be asked to vote on the church committee's recommendation after she preaches on June 8.

Riverside has 1,650 members and affiliates, and a report in 2008 indicated the church had 2,400 members.

The church has been without a senior minister since Brad Braxton resigned in 2009 just two months after his installation when a dispute with his new flock landed the church in court.

The church debated its mission and the pastor's compensation package, which critics said was \$600,000 while a church council member said it was \$457,000. Under Braxton, the church, with more than 100 employees, had a \$12 million budget.

When Braxton was appointed as the church's second black senior minister, the church's changing demographics, from majority white to majority black, was a source of tension. Braxton's evangelical and scripturally focused preaching was also reportedly an issue, which some saw as a threat to Riverside's open and inclusive reputation.

"I think it's high time Riverside had a woman in the pulpit as the senior pastor," said Serene Jones, the first female president of neighboring Union Theological Seminary. She pointed out that she and Butler are both single mothers (both are divorced): "It

just shows a new generation of women leaders can be moms and presidents and pastors.”

Butler received her bachelor’s degree from Baylor University and a doctorate from Wesley Theological Seminary. She grew up in Hawaii and has three children.

Jones said Butler won’t be daunted by the public nature of Riverside and would bring humor and intelligence to the job. “Riverside needs someone who cannot only preach but someone who can pastor and care for people,” Jones said. “She’s also got that wonderful, strong prophetic edge that Riverside values.” —RNS

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