

Women Ordained for the first time in 2024 by Queensland Baptists: Why it took so long and what comes next

Introduction

Until 2024, ordination was not possible for women equipped, called and gifted to be pastors in Queensland Baptist Churches. This was despite other sister denominations making equal standing available to women, by the close of the previous century. Baptist women in the United Kingdom had been serving as ordained ministers since 1917 (Coltman, 2019), but it was not until 1978 that the first Australian Baptist woman, Morita Munro, was ordained by Victorian Baptists (Cronshaw, 1998). The following year, 1979, South Australia also approved women's ordination (Baptist Churches of South Australia and Northern Territory, 1979; Manley, 1979). Over the next two decades other Australian state Baptist denominations, with the exception of Queensland, accepted women's ordination or its equivalent. At its 1995 Assembly, Western Australian Baptists granted parity to women, recognising their giftedness and calling to ministry "without regard to gender" (Baptist Churches of Western Australia, 2014). In 1999, NSW & ACT Baptists followed suit (Hughes & Cronshaw, 2013). But for nearly one-quarter of the twenty-first century, Baptist women in Queensland continued to be denied recognition of their calling to serve God as ordained ministers until, on 2nd May 2024 at its 147th Annual Assembly, Queensland Baptists finally voted to ordain women (Elsmore & Cathie, 2024).

This article will review the history of change that has brought Queensland into line with other Baptist state denominations. It will bring focus to the particulars of the debate and vote, and will consider what this realistically means for women's participation in pastoral leadership in Queensland, particularly noting the progress, stalling and backwards steps of some comparable denominations. Finally, a hypothesis of future opportunities for women's service alongside men in Queensland Baptists will be given.

Early History of Women's Acceptance in Pastoral Ministry

The issue of women in ministry leadership has had a chequered history within Queensland Baptists. For decades Queensland Baptist women, and many men, sought to have women's gifting and calling to ministry leadership recognised and accepted as being equal to that of their male colleagues. In comparison to women's involvement in leadership roles in other Australian state denominations, and overseas examples such as the United Kingdom, the leadership of the Queensland Baptist denomination has also remained significantly male-dominated.

It is 40 years since the prospect of Queensland Baptists (QB) ordaining women was first raised officially. In February 1985 Frank Stone, former General Superintendent of the Baptist Union of Queensland (BUQ), presented a well-researched discussion paper to the BUQ executive supporting women's ordination (Stone, 1985a). Despite support from denominational leadership, repeated Assemblies failed to accept such a move until

it was finally passed with considerable support at the May 2024 Annual Assembly. Why did QB grapple with this issue for so long? Historical research revealed that such opposition was not originally the case.

In 1912, Queensland woman, Janie Bell requested theological training for the ministry. After passing the entry exam she was accepted by the Queensland Baptist College but for reasons now unknown did not pursue her studies (Baptist Union of Queensland, 1997a). Over 40 years passed before another woman, Belle McMahon, also applied for theological training in 1955. However, McMahon did not receive a similarly straightforward response such as Bell had experienced.

Whereas Bell's request had been dealt with directly by the College, in marked contrast, BUQ, the College, and the then Home Mission Department were all involved in considering McMahon's request. Further research was carried out nationally, as well as internationally (the United Kingdom and Germany) before this application was accepted (Stone, 1985a). One may ask, to [mis]quote Professor Julius Sumner Miller, *why was this so?* (Miller, n.d.) The answer to this question can be found in the two significant influences which may be seen to have affected QB during the years between these applications. First, from the 1920's onward, Queensland's growing societal conservatism resulted in its "reputation [as being] the most conservative state in Australia between 1968 and 1989" (Lewis, 2012); and second, the impact of the American Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) in shaping QB's direction in the post-World War II era. Following the 1959 and 1968 Billy Graham Crusades, QB became increasingly involved with the SBC.

Arguably, the mid-60s involvement in the Australia-Missouri Crusades deepened the growing focus towards adopting Southern Baptist methodologies into QB churches. The SBC's growing trend towards patriarchy and insistence upon male-headship/female submission in both home and church life discouraged women from functioning in ministry leadership and saw the withdrawal of women's ordination in the latter decades of the twentieth century (Hughes & Cronshaw, 2004). Howe states the SBC also refused to "endorse the Equal Rights Amendment" (Howe, 1982; Southern Baptist Convention, 2016). These factors suggest their impact upon the traditionally male-dominated QB denomination deepened grass-roots level resistance to the concept of women's ordination. Hence the reaction to McMahon's 1955 application for Theological College entry.

Queensland Baptists and Women in Ministry

1955-1978

McMahon's request did herald the beginning of a new era, however. Following College Principal Warriner's paper on the biblical teachings, McMahon was admitted to the Baptist Theological College of Queensland (BTCQ) for the requisite three-years' study in the newly established *Order of Deaconesses* (Stone, 1985a). Although graduating deaconesses were commissioned, not ordained, BUQ regarded "commission" to mean "for

life” (Stone, 1985a), and during the 17 years the course was offered (1955-72) 18 women undertook the course (Baptist Union of Queensland, 1997a; Stone, 1985a).

Deaconesses undertook many ministerial responsibilities in churches and BUQ over many years but “only three served as Pastors in their own right, in the same country church because of a shortage of men.” (Stone, 1985a) Frank Stone (BUQ Secretary 1956-70; General Superintendent 1970-81) believed deaconesses’ abilities and dedication compared favourably with their contemporary male colleagues and that they could function independently as pastors (Stone, 1985b). However, the Order lapsed during the 1960s-70s, a failure that Stone blames on women’s realisation that there was “no meaningful and satisfying ministry in being a deaconess...women had begun to consider the role as...that of a “second-class minister” (Stone, 1985b). Although two Australian state Baptist denominations, Victoria and South Australia had resolved the issue favourably (Stone, 1985c), Baptist women in Queensland could only watch from afar.

1979-1989

Ordination *per se* was on the Annual Assembly agendas for 1979, 1981 and 1984. These Assemblies endorsed recommendations concerning guidelines for ordination candidates, without mentioning women (Baptist Union of Queensland, 1979, 1981, 1984). However, the issue of women in ministry leadership could no longer be ignored as two QB churches independently appointed women to supervisory pastoral roles.

In 1984, Windsor Road appointed Dawn Courtman as a pastor with several ministry oversight responsibilities (Windsor Road Baptist Church, 1984). Then in March 1986 the Holland Park church appointed Dr Dorothy Harris to their pastoral team to train pastors and missionaries. Articles featuring this appointment were published in *The Sunday Mail*, (Hammond, 1986) *The Queensland Baptist* (Baptist Union of Queensland, 1986b) and *The Australian Baptist* (Australian Baptist Churches, 1986).

Situated between these two events, Rev Frank Stone’s paper, *Ordination and Women*, which recommended women’s ordination, was brought to the 1985 Assembly but failed to gain acceptance (Stone, 1985c). The meeting resolved that the College Faculty be asked to prepare a biblically based paper on both ordination and women’s role in ordination for distribution to the churches during 1986 (Baptist Union of Queensland, 1986c).

BTCQ’s paper “The Ordination of Women”, presenting a case for and against women’s ordination with no specific recommendations, was distributed to all QB churches in 1986 (Baptist Union of Queensland, 1986c). Whilst stating, “the ordination of women is out of the question” (Baptist Union of Queensland, 1986a), the paper offers options retaining “both the principle of male headship and the right of women to be ordained” (Baptist Union of Queensland, 1986a). The College’s second paper, “Ordination Among Queensland Baptists”, concluded women’s ordination was untenable because “male headship is a continuing biblical principle” (Baptist Union of Queensland, 1986b).

The 1986 Annual Assembly deferred these College papers to the 1987 Assembly (Baptist Union of Queensland, 1986c) on which occasion both the Executive paper, *Ordination – Executive Recommendations*, and the proposed *Definition of Ordination* were accepted. However, the issue of women’s ordination was deferred once again, to the 1988 Assembly (Baptist Union of Queensland, 1987). Finally, the 1988 Assembly discussed women’s ordination resolving that women not be ordained but could be accredited as pastoral assistants functioning in full-time team ministry pastoral care roles (Baptist Union of Queensland, 1988).

Continuing Challenges

1990-2009

During the final decade of the twentieth century, the issues of women’s ordination and women in ministry leadership re-surfaced. Four events and their outcomes are of particular interest.

1. Response to 1992 Annual Assembly keynote speaker.

During Assembly 1992 the keynote speaker, Dr Gordon Moyes, addressed the QB Women’s Ministries Conference. He challenged QB women to accept greater ministry leadership roles and responsibilities, citing early church examples of prominent women leaders. Moyes argued the contemporary problem was neither theological nor biblical but was, at its heart, “our attitude towards the role of women in the church” (Martin, 1992a).

Moyes’s address featured in the *Queensland Baptist’s* October edition. The editor, Suzanne Martin, attracted considerable criticism for publishing the report and was accused of using the denominational paper to promote a feminist philosophy. Martin, a young journalism graduate, resigned in 1994 after which the denomination tightened its control over the paper’s content (Martin, 1992b, as cited in Manley, 2006). The next two matters concerning QB women in ministry leadership were outcomes of the 1997 Assemblies.

2. Assembly decides no change for women’s role in ministry

At the 1997 March Half-yearly Assembly, the discussion paper “Women in Ministry in Queensland Baptist Churches” presented five questions:

- “Should women even be in ministry?”
- “Should the status quo simply continue?”
- “Should women be restricted to team ministry roles?”
- “Should women function as solo or senior pastors?”
- “Should women be ordained?” (Baptist Union of Queensland, 1997b).

Assembly Minutes state no changes to the current situation could be expected at least in the near future (Baptist Union of Queensland, 1997c).

3. Election of QB's first woman President declared invalid.

Although not an issue of women's ordination, the circumstances surrounding the traumatic aftermath of the 1997 election of BUQ's first female President-elect, Helen Smith, are indicative of the denominational attitude towards women in senior leadership positions. In addition to Assembly Minutes, articles published in two national publications addressed this particular incident. Throughout Assembly, Smith was relegated to the background and denied the traditional opportunity of briefly addressing the delegates to acknowledge her appointment and no photos were taken to commemorate the occasion. Smith's election was challenged later in the day on a point of order and then deemed invalid (Baptist Union of Queensland, 1997c; Groves & Morrison, 2005; Manley, 2006a, 2006b). All those elected were re-nominated for new balloting at Special Assembly to be held in December.

At the December Assembly, Smith was the only member of the Executive not re-elected (Baptist Union of Queensland, 1997c). It is on record that "one person cheered when the result was announced...[and]... immediately the vote was taken a large number of people left", despite there being further business on the agenda (Groves & Morrison, 2005).

4. Women accredited as Pastoral Assistants.

Over the next nine years supporters were encouraged as some positive steps forward were achieved. The first of these occurred two years after the Smith episode when women were able to be officially recognized as pastoral assistants. The 1999 Assembly accepted Guidelines for Accreditation of Ministers, previously approved by the March Half-Yearly Assembly. The Guidelines stated BUQ's official position regarding women as follows:

...women are not accepted as applicants for accreditation as Ordained Ministers, Un-ordained Ministers, or Student Ministers. Women may be accredited as Pastoral Assistants and have their names included in the list of Accredited Pastoral Assistants provided they are to function in an ongoing pastoral care role in a team ministry (Baptist Union of Queensland, 1999).

Steps forward continued when the 2004 Annual Assembly approved the recognition of women as Registered Pastors, rather than Pastoral Assistants, but continued to withhold ordination (Baptist Union of Queensland, 2004). The on-going denominational history regarding the ordination of women may be traced through archived denominational documents including Assembly Minutes, Ordination Guidelines (Baptist Union of Queensland, 1999), the 2004 Quinquennial Review and the 2008 Ordination Review Committee (ORC) report (Nickerson, 2008).

In October 2006, nine years after the Helen Smith debacle, Lorraine Walker was inducted as President of Queensland Baptists (Baptist Union of Queensland, 2006a). That same Assembly approved a motion instructing the Board to appoint an Ordination Review Committee (ORC). Scope included: "Who should be ordained?" and "Should women be ordained?" (Baptist Union of Queensland, 2006b). However, when the ORC recommendation that QB ordain women was brought to the May 2009 Special Assembly, it was again rejected

(Baptist Union of Queensland, 2009). This outcome prompted the online blog *neoBaptist* to publish an article “Why Queensland Baptists won’t ordain women” (Fetting, 2009). Nevertheless, the next decade would see some progress.

2010 - 2024

In a paper published in 2011 Baptist historian, Dr Anne Klose, commented on the need for QB to determine whether responsibility for ordination lies with the denomination *per se* or with the local church as recommended by Grenz (Grenz, 2000; Klose, 2011). Progress was made when the 2013 Assembly accepted the revised *Registration and Ordination Guidelines* (Queensland Baptists, 2013). Women could now become Registered Ministers, but ordination was still denied. The matter lay in abeyance for another 10 years. In the Discussion paper circulated in 2023, the Board cited three factors that had prompted their decision to revisit the issue:

- Several churches had requested the issue be revisited;
- Condie’s doctoral research showed 64% of Queensland Baptists supported women’s ordination;
- The number of qualified women already serving as pastors who believed God had called them to this ministry (Queensland Baptists, 2023a).

The topic was placed on the 2024 Annual Assembly agenda (Elsmore & Cathie, 2024).

Ordination Allowed by the Queensland Baptist Assembly

In 2023, the Director of the QB Movement, Pastor Jason Elsmore introduced a proposal for women to be ordained in Queensland Baptist churches in a manner that would emphasise the autonomy of the local church (Hendrick, 2023). This emphasis would create a pathway for churches who wished to ordain their already registered female pastors, but held enough emphasis on local church autonomy to reassure churches that were conservative on the issue, and that this change was not being forced upon them. The passive language used appeared to be enough to reassure some churches that their conservative interests were protected. The key changes explained by Rev David Elvery, were firstly, that a local church, rather than the candidate, would initiate the process; and secondly, that the church would have representation on the ordination recommendation committee, which had previously been a specially appointed sub-committee of the Queensland Baptist Ministerial Committee assessment panel.

Consistent with many significant changes made by the denominational services group, a twelve-month consultation process would be conducted in time for a refined motion to be put to the assembly in 2024 (Hendrick, 2023). Questions or comments were made by six male pastors, one female pastor and one female lay person (Hendrick, 2023). The general tone was one of urging civility and gentleness in the upcoming debates. The exhortations alluded to the stress experienced by women particularly in the 2008 and 2009 assemblies: a

phenomenon understood from conversation with affected women but had not been formally recorded. A year of consultation before the 2024 Assembly vote followed.

The passing of the vote at Assembly in 2024 for women to be ordained

On 2 May 2024 the Queensland Baptist Assembly passed by secret ballot:

That local churches have a more significant participation in the ordination process including the identification of men and women as candidates for ordination according to their theological understanding of ordination and of who may be eligible and subject otherwise to the Registration Guidelines (B8.04) as amended from time to time (Elsmore & Cathie, 2024).

After the counting of the votes, between other items of business, the assembly was notified that the motion had passed. There was no expansion, prayer nor other moment to mark the significant milestone. The Queensland Baptist denomination did no social media, press releases, nor any other public communication to announce the significant change.

Concerns over loss of local church autonomy

A key issue for delegates and pastors was the importance of the preservation of local church autonomy in a climate of increasing centralisation of governance. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic some Baptist pastors and members were highly concerned at the swift, centralised action taken by the government and communicated through denominational bodies on the health measures taken on matters such as vaccination and restricting group gatherings. These anxieties found particular focus in documents such as the “Ezekiel Declaration” (Littlefield et al., 2021) with the ideas later expanded upon in the book published by two vocal Queensland Baptist Pastors, Matthew Littlefield and Tim Grant (Littlefield & Grant, 2022). Their arguments on the importance of individual liberty and church autonomy were met with some sympathy among many in a time when local church congregations felt a loss of control over their worship practices to the higher authority of secular government. While the churches most concerned with the ideals of conscience, may also be observed to have been conservative in their views on the role of women in ministry, their voiced anxieties put local church autonomy on the agenda. Pastor Tim Eyschen at the 2023 Baptist Assembly (Hendrick, 2023) began his comments with an explanation that he did not see a biblical mandate for women to serve in pastoral ministry. He did however, credit Dr Anne Klose, lecturer in Baptist Distinctives at Malyon College (the Queensland Baptist Theological College), for teaching him that autonomy of the local church is a key Baptist distinctive. In the interests of this distinctive and intellectual honesty he flagged his intention to vote in favour of women’s ordination. The words of this student pastor were compelling in their honesty and logic and likely represented what became a sizable group of voters at the 2024 assembly. Many who voted in the affirmative on the grounds of church autonomy, expressed confidence in the prediction that women would never be ordained in their local church. The denominational leadership’s choice to emphasise church autonomy was a smart emphasis to get the vote over the line but left little mandate for the specific nurture of women’s leadership in the next few years.

What came next

The new process was not made available to churches until 26 June, 2024 (Pieper, 2024). While on the surface the change would appear to be only a matter of order, the understanding of how church endorsement would be established was not universal. Many evangelical churches, including Queensland Baptists, have broad statements of belief that make no mention of gender in leadership. Changes to the language and eligibility of women into leadership roles are more likely to be scrutinised and criticised than other staffing changes (Matthews, 2022). The availability of the new process was communicated to churches through the QB Hub, a weekly internal email, with little fanfare. The denominational roll-out of eligibility for women to be ordained was quiet, bureaucratic and not discernibly celebrated.

In 2024, two female pastors were ordained. Firstly, Karen Haynes was ordained at Life Point Christian Church on 10 November. Rev Haynes completed the necessary study and experience requirements for ordination in 2012 while serving at North-East Baptist Church. Since 2016, she has been served as a full-time Air Force Chaplain, endorsed by Queensland Baptists (Campbell, 2024). Lorraine Pfeffer was ordained the following week on 17 November at Ashgrove Baptist Church, where she had served in ministry with a focus on pastoral care since 2005 (Ashgrove Baptist Church, 2024). Hoa Trinh, Queensland Baptists' only current female senior pastor, and a small number of other women are most likely to navigate the ordination criteria in 2025. Women likely to be successful, will have been employed in large churches as pastors, have undertaken theological study in Baptist institutions and have churches that have expressed confidence in their ministry as indicated by their use of equal language to describe the ministry of the women they employ (Queensland Baptists, 2024). Other women who are currently serving as pastors will need to navigate the minimum recognised work requirements, further study, and the unclarified positions of their church communities when considering whether ordination is a beneficial milestone for their ministry.

Queensland Baptists Trajectory in light of Sister Denominations

Comparison to New South Wales and ACT Baptists

Despite having had ordination for women for over 25 years, New South Wales and Australian Capital Territory (NSW & ACT) Baptist Churches have not experienced impressive growth in women's participation in pastoral ministry. In the 2023 Queensland Baptists Directory, 20 women were Registered Pastors (with an additional three women holding a dormant registration) out of 334 Registered Pastors (Queensland Baptists, 2023b), a 5% representation on a headcount basis. This is a generous expression of the numbers given women are more likely

to hold part-time roles. This figure contrasts with the Baptist Churches of NSW & ACT whose 2024 figures show 32 accredited women out of 296 Accredited¹ Pastors or 10% (G. McWhitter, personal communication, 29 August, 2024). Women have been eligible for ordination in the Baptist Churches of NSW & ACT since 1999 (Thornton, 2020). The difference of just a 5% proportion between NSW & ACT Baptist Churches and Queensland appears relatively small given the twenty-five year head start on ordination. While accreditation and ordination are different processes, for most pastors with a sense of vocational call, ordination represents a key milestone in realising this calling. Having had the full pathway of recognition open to women for twenty-five years, the experience in NSW & ACT is still one of challenge for women to be able to navigate this journey. The eligibility of women for ordination is thus only one ingredient required to see a more equitable proportion of women enter and maintain pastoral roles.

Comparison to Western Australian Baptists

To consider where the future may lie, a state denomination in a similar cultural context to Queensland may be a more useful model than Queensland's neighbouring state. Western Australia, like Queensland, is a large state geographically with a focus on resources and agriculture, but smaller in population, 5.5mil in Queensland vs 2.9mil in Western Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2024). In the spring of 1995, following a task force review, the Baptist Assembly accepted the recommendation that the denomination eliminate ordination, leaving accreditation as the denominational instrument of recognising gifting and calling of pastors, accessible to both men and women (Baptist Churches of Western Australia, 2014). Since the mid-1990s women have had a continued presence in pastoral ministry, but the numbers are humble. Looking to 2021 data, the Baptist College, Vose, had a female student participation of 37.14%. While 12 out of the 60 students studying for accreditation were female, just 9 out of the 12 were accreditation candidates. Twenty-two pastors across Western Australia were female, with only one in a full-time senior role (Velebir, 2021). The Western Australian level of female participation in pastoral ministry appears commensurate with Queensland Baptists, also boasting strong levels of women studying at the Baptist college, but with registered pastors in the low 20s and only one female senior pastor (Queensland Baptists, 2023b). Pastor Christine Velebir, one of Western Australia's pastors, argues that more than permission, a cultural change including an intentional program of role-modelling, advocacy by Baptist institutions and the patronage of influential men is needed (Velebir, 2021). It is reasonable to suggest that without initiatives to support discernment, encourage employment and provide opportunities, then women's participation in pastoral leadership in Western Australia is unlikely to see significant growth.

¹ State-base Baptist Unions around Australia use the language of "accreditation" to denote pastors with a professional recognition and ongoing professional development. Queensland changed the term to "registration" in 2009 in order to communicate increased professional development expectations.

The ongoing challenge to realise the change across Queensland

A trajectory of greater participation of women in pastoral roles is not necessarily a guaranteed prediction. In Queensland, churches can turn from egalitarian back to complementarian relatively quickly, given the congregational construct that in practice is reliant on the Senior Pastor for biblical interpretation. Women's leadership is not seen as a key issue for busy members, while contemporary churches have become adept at spotlighting enough talented women to avoid appearing prejudiced (Matthews, 2022).

Churches are the gateways to discernment, sponsorship and development of pastors. Encouragement or discouragement in early years of discernment is highly influential. An opportunity for women to serve in leadership requires the sponsoring pastor to have an egalitarian framework, high confidence in his (usually male) ability to navigate reputational concerns, as well as a high degree of egalitarian leaning from much of the formal membership. The likelihood of these factors all breaking out in favour of women's sponsorship are low. Thus, Queensland Baptists' history of engagement, or lack thereof, would indicate that, in many Queensland Baptist churches, women are unlikely to discern a call to pastoral ministry.

Without vigilance, progress can be lost

Gen Z women's numbers are falling

While women have traditionally outnumbered men in the churches, Australian Bureau of Statistics, NCLS data and anecdotal observation all point to a slow yet steady exodus of young women who no longer see a place to belong, in large part due to their perceived secondary status and concerns about abuse of power (Gaddini, 2022; Graham, 2024; Shorter & Riches, 2023, Medhora, 2024). Researchers note that women under the age of 28 in particular are concerned about male-dominated structures and their lack of opportunity to meaningfully participate in leadership and decision making (Medhora, 2024). Whether openly acknowledged or not, a growing body of research and resources are pointing the church to dangers of male-only voices in making institutions less safe for women and children (Common Grace, 2018). The steady decline in young women's participation in church may cause evangelical churches, including Baptists, to consider the root causes of this.

Defunding Women's Ministry

As a denomination, Queensland Baptists does not focus on women's discernment or development while it does set aside resources for Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) leadership development. At the same 2024 assembly, the decision by the Services Group (affirmed by the assembly) to defund denominational Women's Ministry was announced (Hendrick, 2023). This followed the national trend of closing state-based denominational women's ministry in favour of a more integrated approach (Baxter, 2023). For Queensland Baptist Women, the denominational Women's Ministry events were one of the few opportunities women had to

see and hear women preach if they did not attend one of the handful of churches with women preachers. At a national level, the Australian Baptists have created a new body to specifically focus on empowering the leadership of women (Gan et al., 2023). Queensland Baptists have not communicated this new venture, nor placed any paid senior leaders of the denomination onto the task force. So, while women's ministry in other states has transformed from ministry to women to empowering the ministry of women, Queensland Baptists, at a denominational level no longer resource either cause.

Presbyterians Backward Steps

It can be observed there is a quiet expectation in the mainstream of the Baptist movement, that there is an inevitable slant towards "progress" with regards to the inclusion of diversity, whether by ethnicity, gender, class or educational background. This confidence is not based on data or experience, but likely the vague notion that the church will keep up with society's best progress based on common sense and its own survival instincts. Such a view denies the instincts of the small groups of leaders, that as a cohort, benefit from the narrow selection criteria of church leaders to men like themselves, and in plenty of cases, their sons. The Presbyterian Church in Australia paints an obvious picture of regression of progress. With the amalgamation of churches in 1977 into the Uniting Church, the continuing Presbyterian Church has lost its more progressive and centrist churches. With this change it was simultaneously understandable by the numbers, but shocking to Christians' assumptions, that access to ordination for women was removed in 1991 (Downie, 2012), while ordination and privileges attached were retained for already ordained women (The Presbyterian Church of Australia, 2010). The assumption that ordination for women in Queensland Baptists has settled the matter of allowing women to contribute according to their gifting and calling is premature. The opportunities for women to meaningfully serve in pastoral roles in Queensland Baptist churches remain limited and may even reduce if a backlash is released by conservative churches and not meaningfully countered by the denomination and engaged "middle" churches. Given the lack of concerted championing of women's development by the denomination, a growth in participation appears permitted but neither expected nor encouraged.

Role Modelling and Discernment

Women's lack of role models may be an issue for women discerning their future, an issue which society and business at large are motivated to correct (Paule & Yelin, 2022). Seeing women lead in a local church or preach outside of Mother's Day is a novel experience for most Queensland Baptists. Whether members are cognitively aware of this or not, exclusion is caused by benign neglect or system design. Consequently, the chances of women discerning a call to ministry leadership drop with a lack of role models who could demonstrate a legitimate and practical means of exercising their God-given gifts.

Christian churches across Australia are seeing a decline in pastors available for full-time vocational leadership at a senior or solo level (MacBride, 2023; Mitchell, 2020). Clare Steel, CEO of Compassion Australia, argues

that women need to be visible as church leaders for younger women to be able to see themselves in such roles (McCrindle, 2020). Conversely, as highlighted by the numerous “firsts” in the history of Baptist ministry, a sense of calling can be a powerful enabler for women alongside supportive male counterparts. The idea that women will discern a calling to ministry without female role-models belies the Baptist distinctive of discernment within a local church setting. Pastors, deacons and the church membership are expected to take an active role in identifying believers gifted and suitable for pastoral leadership. While the requisite gifts are often identified in young women’s service in children’s, youth and worship ministry, they mysteriously disappear when considering those who would be suitable for vocational ministry. The pipeline of potential talent that churches can identify is very healthy, when looking at young, emerging leaders. Project 11 is a Queensland Baptist Services Group program designed to support local churches foster emerging talent. The percentage of women in the program was 53% in 2022 and 2023 and 51% in 2024 (Mandall personal communication, 29 July, 2024). If the future mimics the past, most of these women will not proceed beyond deputy or ministry leader roles to pastoral, eldership or diaconate appointments without significant culture change in the local church’s view of suitable pastoral leadership.

Some Realistic Challenges

The change made to allow women to be ordained, is a historically significant moment while simultaneously keeping the system structured towards male dominance in leadership. The path to ordination requires sponsorship by local churches, heavily reliant on their senior pastor, a long course of expensive study, an expectation of full-time pastoral employment while navigating hostility toward part-time work and work breaks to bear children (D Elvery personal communication 21 February, 2022). Given the numerous systemic barriers to the inclusion of women in the church and denomination in pastoral and leadership roles, one can surmise there is unlikely to be an influx of women heading towards ordination and life-long vocational ministry in similar number to men. Instead, women are likely to be found leading in the context of team and bi-vocational ministry as more often befits their lives of holistic service (Zikmund et al., 1998).

The eligibility of women for ordination may be hindered by the extensive study requirements. The path women may utilise is more likely to be the vocational path with a particular emphasis on equipping bi-vocational pastors from non-English speaking backgrounds (Malyon Vocational Training, 2024). This path focuses on more affordable, shorter and practical study. Such a path would be more appealing to women who need to manage career breaks and portfolio careers, while tending to caring responsibilities and having less opportunity to realise the economic benefits of higher education. To date, no CALD women have used the program to seek registration, but three women have used the Diploma of Christian Ministry to achieve registration since it was made possible in 2017 (C. Thomas, personal communication, 3 October, 2024). While the Ministerial Services Committee is currently not open to allowing a break from registered ministry for the purposes of bearing and

raising children (D. Elvery, personal communication, February 21, 2022), it can be supposed that this will become the norm as a younger generation of pastors seek to take a more equal and active role in parenting their children (World Economic Forum, 2024). The changes to theological education brought about by the merger of Malyon and Morling, as well as the refocus on ministry pathways, will give Queensland Baptists the opportunity to consider the issue of study (MacBride, 2024).

The changing nature of church ministry teams may give further opportunities to women. As churches experiment with a more diverse composition of pastoral team members, women are likely to be included in higher numbers. Whether the denomination will move in a timely manner to cater for greater specialisation of ministry or remain committed to prioritising the full-time vocational model remains to be seen. The low prioritisation of the Ministry Worker registration, also endorsed by the assembly in May 2024, points to the immediate focus on full-time, long-term pastors (Elvery, 2024; Queensland Baptists: CGSG, 2024).

A Conservative Evangelical Culture Remains

Queensland Baptists is an evangelical denomination, in federation with other Baptist state-based denominations that are linked through Australian Baptist Ministries. Arguably, Queensland has the most distinctively conservative tradition (Condie, 2020; Hope, 2023), with the slow take up of women's ordination being one sign of a singular approach to evangelistic faith while other states hold together a broader range of evangelical belief and practice. Given this narrow focus, Queensland Baptist churches are the most likely to imbue a gender essentialist view of pastoral leadership. In this view, men are expected to serve through agentic leadership behaviours, while women are expected to demonstrate communal leadership behaviours (Dzubinski, 2016). For most Queensland Baptist churches, the eligibility of women for ordination is therefore a theoretical change with little application to their congregation. This is despite a challenging lack of pastors in their thirties and forties making themselves available for Senior or Solo pastoral ministry (MacBride, 2023; Mitchell, 2020). Women will be expected to contribute to the life of the church through the gendered roles of children's ministry, pastoral care, music and administration and titled as workers and assistants rather than as pastoral leaders. Women who expect to be given the tools of equitable remuneration, title and authority to accomplish their assigned objectives are likely to be penalised for their "unfeminine" behaviour (Dzubinski, 2016; Eagly, 2007; Koenig et al., 2011). History and the current situation would suggest that Queensland Baptist churches, for all their progress in technology, safety and community connection, remain gender-essentialist in their approach while other Queensland faith and non-faith based organisations reach for greater input from women.

For Queensland Baptists there lie two possible pathways ahead for greater participation of women in pastoral leadership. First, that the denominational leadership, at a board and vocational leadership level will change direction and champion the pulling from a broader pool of church members in the task of discerning pastoral calling. Second, that the churches themselves will pursue to a greater degree more specialist teams made up of

part-time pastors. This structure would suit the inclusion of more women who tend to have greater non-linear, portfolio careers where specialist skills have been developed. In the meantime, a symbol of recognition of calling has been gained for the few women who can navigate the existing congregational and organisational hurdles. Whether the pathway will become wider and more welcoming of women remains to be seen.

Conclusion

2024 has been a break-through year for Queensland Baptists. The denomination now demonstrates parity with other states in allowing women to access the entire pathway of study, registration, and ordination in support of their calling to pastoral ministry in Queensland Baptists. The pathway to opening this opportunity was unusually long as key figures in the denomination and Bible College opposed, or failed to support, efforts to allow women to access these mechanisms. Condie's doctoral research demonstrated that Baptist congregants supported women's participation in these mechanisms to a higher degree than had been demonstrated by the voters at the Baptist Assemblies (Condie, 2020).

The vote to allow women to be ordained, reemphasising the sponsorship of the local church, tapped into the highly valued distinctive of autonomy in the local church. The lack of fanfare or publicity following the change signalled the denomination having put a controversial issue to rest. The experience of NSW & ACT Baptist Churches as well as Western Australian Baptists points to the likelihood that while women will continue to serve in pastoral ministry roles in Queensland Baptist Churches, there is unlikely to be strong growth in either numbers or seniority. To see a greater participation of women in pastoral leadership, more work involving supporting discernment and creating opportunities would be needed.

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