

**AMERICAN BAPTIST  
POLICY STATEMENT ON ORDAINED MINISTRY**

**PREAMBLE**

American Baptists believe that every person who confesses faith in Jesus Christ is called to discipleship and ministry (I Corinthians 12:12-13).<sup>\*1</sup> We affirm the priesthood of all believers (I Peter 2:9; Romans 12:1-8), in which all believers are directly responsible to God for their obedience to the Gospel. We affirm that every Christian is gifted by God for ministry (I Corinthians 12-14:26; Romans 12:1-8; Ephesians 4:11-16; I Peter 4:10-11; Acts 2:14-21). Not only are these important biblical affirmations, but they are also major emphases of Baptist tradition within the whole Church of Jesus Christ.

God has given the church the ministry of reconciliation to God through Christ. This ministry is grounded in God's reconciliation of us in which we are constituted a new creation in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:16-21). This ministry and word of reconciliation, that God in Christ is reconciling the world to God, belongs to all persons (Galatians 3:26-29) in God's new creation, the Church. Another form of this same broad perspective is represented in the Gospels' presentation of the presence of God's kingdom or reign in Jesus and his work, exemplified in Jesus' reading of the words from Isaiah to "preach good news to the poor...to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord" (Luke 4:18-19).

Throughout the history of Israel and in the early church, as reflected in the Old and New Testaments, the people of God have always understood the importance of recognizing some persons as leaders within the community of faith. These persons had specific responsibilities within the ministry for the stewardship of the word of God, the identity of the new community of faith and the empowerment of the whole people of God to fulfill its obligation of ministry.

In the early church and in Baptist history there has always been a degree of tension, but not antithesis or antagonism--between the ministry to which all the people of God are called, and the ordained ministry of those set apart and recognized for leadership and specific responsibilities in the work of God's people. This tension is present in the Bible as well as in the Baptist understanding of the Church, its structure and governance.

Two convictions are clear. First, there is no contradiction in affirming both the ministry of the whole people of God and the necessity and value of ordained ministers with specific responsibilities. Second, ordained persons do bear the responsibility of their designated ministries, but are not a separate class within the church or a group with special access to God.

**I. THE BASIS IN SCRIPTURE**

Leadership in ancient Israel was exercised by priests, prophets and persons charged with governance. Leaders and individual women (Deborah in Judges 5; Huldah in 2 Kings 22:11-20; Esther 9:11-15) as well as men were responsible both to God and the people of God. Especially important for the early Church was the role of the prophet who spoke the word of God to contemporary situations both in terms of judgment and of grace and hope. This prophetic ministry was understood in the early Church to have come both to the whole community (Acts 2:14-21; 1 Corinthians 12) and to persons charged with specific responsibilities of leadership (1 Corinthians 12:28; Romans 12:6; Galatians 1:15-16; Acts 9:15-16). This prophetic role has had significant influence on the Baptist tradition. Another important type of leadership which has influenced Baptists is the model of Moses as a liberator of God's people.

The New Testament provides no single pattern for leadership in the church, since it is composed of separate texts addressed originally to particular churches and situations. These texts reflect a variety of leadership patterns which have contributed to Baptist understandings of ordained ministry.

It is clear that, alongside the ministry committed to the whole people of God, the earliest churches recognized and honored persons designated and set apart as leaders with particular responsibilities in the Church's ministry (1 Thessalonians 5:12-13; 1 Corinthians 16:15-16; Romans 15:7-22; James 3:1; Hebrews 13:7; 1 Peter 5:1-4; Romans 16:1-16; Philippians 1:1; 1 Timothy 3:1-13; 2 Timothy; Titus 1:5-9; Acts 13:1-3; 20:17-35).

Both women and men were leaders in the early Church. Although the names of men are more familiar, the New Testament provides us with the names of ten women who were leaders in the ministry of the earliest churches, including Phoebe, Priscilla, and Lydia (Romans 16:1-16; Philippians 4:2-3; Acts 16:13-15, 40.)<sup>1</sup>

The primary tasks of leaders were to serve the Church and equip its members for the whole work of the ministry. In so doing they were to preach and teach the word of God, admonish, exercise authority in the Lord, care for the Church and model life in Christ. It should be recognized that the New Testament gives no explicit indication that these persons were especially responsible for leadership in the observance of baptism or the Lord's Supper.

The designated leaders of the early Church were to be supported by the Church, in terms of encouragement (1 Thessalonians 5:13), recognition of their authority (1 Thessalonians 5:12-13; 1 Corinthians 16:15-18; Hebrews 13:7) and financial remuneration (Galatians 6:6; 1 Corinthians 9:1-14; 1 Timothy 5:17;<sup>2</sup> Philippians 4:14-19). Although not particularly emphasized in the Baptist tradition, the earliest local churches had multiple leaders rather than single leaders in most cases (see Romans 16:1-2 for a possible exception). Churches with one pastoral leader emerged by the beginning of the second century A.D. Bivocational ministry was often the early church model (Act 18:3).

There were leadership conflicts in the earliest churches (Acts 6:1-4; 1 Corinthians 1-4; 2 Corinthians 10:7-11; 3 John 9-10), from which we learn the importance of faithfulness to apostolic witness, the need for sensitivity to cultural and ethnic differences and the importance of personal maturity and humility in the context of service to the Church.

In the New Testament the practice of the "laying on of hands" is not necessarily or always associated with the appointment of designated leaders (see also Old Testament examples in Numbers 27:15-23; Deuteronomy 34:9). It is noted that hands of the Apostles were laid on those chosen to serve the Jerusalem church's daily distribution (Acts 6:6), on Paul and Barnabas by the prophets and teachers at Antioch (Acts 13:1-3), on Timothy by the Ephesians leadership and on Paul (1 Timothy 4:14; 2 Timothy 1:6). No mention is made of the laying on of hands for other named and unnamed leaders in the Church mentioned in the New Testament. Not until the second century A.D. did the practice of laying on of hands become closely associated with ordination.

The definition, standard and expectations for ministry, especially for those leaders set apart, are found in the classic statements of Paul about

---

<sup>1</sup> For more information see the ABC Policy Statement "Women and Men as Partners in Church and Society." Adopted by the General Board of the ABC, December 1982.

<sup>2</sup> In the New Revised Standard Version "double honor" means payment.

his ministry: 1 Corinthians 4:1-5; 9-13; 2 Corinthians 4:1-15;

Philippians 3:7-16. We commend the study of these texts to the whole Church for the health of its ministry.

## II THE BASIS IN BAPTIST TRADITION

Even though the Scriptures are the fundamental source of our understanding of ordained ministry, Baptist views on the subject cannot be understood apart from their history and tradition. By taking a historical approach we are able to see how Baptists have understood the Bible with respect to ministerial offices and how they have implemented such understanding.

Baptists have maintained that churches must have persons designated for the pastoral office. Unlike the early Quakers who were their contemporaries, early Baptists held that "a particular church, gathered and organized<sup>3</sup> according to the mind of Christ, consists of officers and members." Church officers, especially pastoral ministers, were necessary for the well-being of the church, though not essential to its very being as some maintained.

There was no complete agreement about the names of church officers. General Baptists preferred one set of terms, while Particular Baptists employed another. Gradually, however, both gravitated to the common use of pastors and deacons. It is worth noting that, although a variety of persons in church offices (pastors, bishops, messengers, ruling elders, deacons, overseers) were ordained, they were not all commonly referred to as "ministers." This term was uniformly applied to those who served as pastors. It was not that persons in pastoral office were more important than others, but special functions were delegated to this office and those who discharged these responsibilities were examined and approved as having the necessary gifts for such service.

Early Baptists also agreed that the choice of officers was to be "by common suffrage of the church," thus denying both the right of bishops to ordain and appoint pastors and the authority of presbyteries over ordination and placement. The election and ordination of ministers by the church, otherwise known as the outward call, was an expression of the principle that such a call should be validated by the church as a whole. Thus, ordained ministers were chosen to serve in a representative capacity and were authorized to act on behalf of the church. The belief was that Christ had endowed some with the gifts for ordained ministry, and that a congregation of Christians sensitive to the leading of the Holy Spirit could discern who had these gifts.

Ordination was, in effect, a ratification of God's call of the individual to ordained ministry. It was necessary that the call be tested. After the congregation was convinced that the person was called by God, it granted a license to preach. The period of licensure usually lasted for a year or two. The final step was ordination, following examination by a council of representatives from other Baptist churches. This examination covered the candidate's Christian experience, sense of call, and theological beliefs. This step usually occurred when there was a call to a specific church or place of ministry. Persons<sup>4</sup> to be ordained were formally set apart by a service of ordination with the laying on of hands. As stated earlier, the laying on of hands did not signify to early Baptists a belief in apostolic succession, the conveying of a special power to administer the Lord's Supper, or elevation to a superior status

---

<sup>3</sup> Second London Confession, XXVI, 8, in *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, ed. W.L. Lumpkin (Judson, 1969), p.5.

<sup>4</sup> There were women preachers in the first generation of Baptists. Since these early times women exercised leadership in the churches. Baptist churches began ordaining women in the 1880.s.

before God. Rather, it was a public recognition by a church that a person had appropriate qualities of mind and spirit, dedication to Christ and the Church, and the necessary preparation, was set apart for ordained ministry.

### **III. THE VOCATION OF THE ORDAINED MINISTER**

Ordained ministers share in the common ministry of all believers. All Christians are called to ministry both within the church and in the world. We are called to proclaim the gospel in word and deed, thereby bearing witness to churches. Baptist churches began ordaining women in the 1880's.

God's reign includes inviting persons to faith in Christ, nurturing one another in Christian discipleship, respecting human dignity and rights, working for peace and justice, and advocating stewardship of the earth's resources.

Ordained ministers are those who are called by the community of faith to be leaders in the stewardship of the gospel, particularly in proclamation and worship. Therefore, they are responsible to help the community understand its nature and purpose as a community of faith, based upon a relationship with God through Jesus Christ. The ordained ministers are charged to take special care for fidelity to the gospel in the church's life and mission.

Ordained ministers assume a leading role in equipping the saints for the work of ministry (Ephesians 4:11-12). They are to help acquaint people with spiritual resources, to inform consciences, to encourage, to counsel, to administer the church's organizational life, and otherwise to direct attention and energies toward fulfilling God's purpose of uniting all things in Christ (Ephesians 1:9-10).

The local church continues to be the primary setting for ordained ministry, though ordained persons serve the church and the world in a variety of ways including missionaries, church educators, seminary professors, institutional chaplains, and administrators. Roles and settings may change according to circumstances and skills, but the essential identity of ordained ministry is always rooted in its responsibility for a vision of the church's whole ministry in service of the whole Gospel. Ordained ministers are to be leaders in articulating and implementing this vision, in all of its priestly and prophetic dimensions. They have devoted themselves to gaining a knowledge of the Bible and the ways in which it can illuminate the issues of life. The combination of gifts and training enable the ordained to guide and support the community of faith as it seeks the leading of the Spirit to respond to the complexities of Christian discipleship in our world.

Tasks traditionally performed by ordained ministers include: leading the church in mission, preaching, conducting public worship, administering baptism and the Lord's Supper, teaching, preparing candidates for church membership or baptism, visiting, counseling, conducting weddings and funerals, and administering the church's organization. Also, ordained ministers have traditionally represented the church and its concerns in wider public and religious arenas. Any of these tasks could be performed by others within the church, with proper authorization. By virtue of their calling and ordination, however, the ordained have been charged to ensure that these activities and many others in the life of the church are grounded in Scripture and informed by our Baptist heritage.

In recognizing and calling men and women to ordained ministry, the church exercises its authority to order its life and mission under God. It then recognizes in those it ordains an entrusted authority to instruct, guide, comfort, and challenge in the name of the gospel. The authority ascribed to ordained ministers is not to be exercised as power over others. It is not authority over the church but in the church.

All authority in the church is modeled on the example of Christ who "came not to be served but to serve," and who taught that among Gentiles "...the rulers exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant" (Matthew 20:25-26, 28). For ordained ministers, this means that authority ultimately depends upon a servant style of leadership, which is manifest in genuine care for others, a willingness to work in partnership with others, a readiness to place the Gospel before personal ambitions, an openness to evaluation and growth, and a calling forth of other people's gifts. For the community of faith, this means a willingness to attend to and support faithful ordained ministers.

Adequate care for the ordained minister's personal and financial needs, openness to guidance and instruction, steadfast participation in the church's life, and prayer for the ordained minister, even though periods of disagreement and controversy, are examples of adequate support.

The vocation of ordained ministry does not rest on a special and unique function which belongs exclusively to ordained ministers. It does not rest upon a special spiritual status that only ordained ministers can attain. It is a vocation which is called into being for the life of the community of faith, a vocation in which some persons are recognized by the church as its representatives, to be entrusted with the task of mirroring back to it the Gospel by which it lives, to teach, preach, guide, comfort, and encourage by reliance on the Spirit's power by which the church lives.

#### **IV. ORDINATION AMONG AMERICAN BAPTIST CHURCHES<sup>5</sup>**

God moves in the lives of persons and in the community of faith to call individuals to ordained ministry. Often that call comes in the context of life in the local church where one's commitment to Jesus Christ has been made, the power of the Gospel is experienced, and one's gifts are affirmed and encouraged. Both the internal call and the external call are important. Initially a person may sense a call from within or a pastor, a deacon, or other church member may believe that a person is called and speak to that person about it. Then the local church confirms the call by providing opportunities for identifying and developing the person's gifts for ordained ministry and learning more about the church's mission. It also gives guidance and support as the individual contemplates the decision to accept the call and to enter a period of preparation for ordained ministry.

Continuing the Baptist tradition, the local church examines the claim to a call from God and approves the candidate's fitness for ordained ministry. If the church is convinced that the individual possesses the gifts for ordained ministry and the call is genuine, the individual is licensed by the local church. In keeping with the associational principle of Baptist life,<sup>6</sup> and in recognition of the fact that one seldom remains indefinitely in one's home church to serve in the ordained ministry, other American Baptist churches have an interest in the ordained minister. A local church still takes the initiative by communicating to other Baptist churches or its Region a desire to ordain the one who has been licensed. The association or region then examines the candidate's qualifications, and when satisfied that the credentials are in order, and the candidate has received a call to a particular position of ministry, either notifies the originating church that an ordination council may be convened or the Region itself calls into session its standing ordination commission to

---

<sup>5</sup> See "Recommended Procedures for Ordination, Commissioning, and Recognition for the Christian Ministry in the American Baptist Churches." Adopted by the Commission on the Ministry and the Ministers Council, May 1997.

<sup>6</sup> See "Autonomy and Interdependence Within the American Baptist Denomination: A Declaration." Adopted by the General Board of the ABC, December 1983.

examine the candidate. The participation of representatives of other American Baptist churches in the ordination council involves the local church in a broader, interdependent process of discerning those who should be ordained. A local church may ordain a person on its own without participation of other churches in the process, but American Baptist ordination standing requires regional recognition.

Candidates for ordination are asked to give evidence that they have been called to ordained ministry. Usually this includes a description of their life in Christ, including their personal commitment to Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. They are also expected to be able to describe their call to ordained ministry and their understanding of the relationship of ordained ministry to the ministry of the whole Church. In addition, their gifts for ordained ministry are discussed and examined.

Another important qualification is adequate education preparation provided by a disciplined program of theological studies or its equivalent as spelled out in 1997 Recommended Procedures. Candidates are asked questions to determine their theological beliefs and the implications of those beliefs for the church's life and mission. They are also asked questions to determine that they have adequate understanding of the American Baptist heritage and purpose, and a commitment to American Baptist Churches and our participation in the mission of the whole Church. A candidate's character, personal qualities and ethics are also considered. Finally, a candidate must show a commitment to growth in ministry and to a journey of faith lasting a lifetime. If the council determines that the candidate is suited for ordained ministry, it recommends that the local church proceed with an ordination service.

The ordination service is the church's public recognition of the call. Churches of the association or Region are invited to send representatives to participate. Included in the service is an affirmation of the commitment to this calling, charges to the ordained and to the church, and the laying on of hands as prayer is offered for God's blessing upon the person's ministry and for the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

When an ordained minister resigns from a position to which she or he has been called, it is incumbent upon all parties to honor the severance of this pastoral relationship.

## **V. CONCLUSION**

Ordained ministry is firmly rooted in Scripture and has been part of Baptist tradition from the very beginning. In every period of our history, Baptists have affirmed the need for persons who would be set apart for ordained ministry, honored and esteemed by the whole people of God. That remains so today, and will not be less critical for future generations. Given the crucial role of ordained ministry in Baptist experience, the churches are charged with important responsibilities. One duty is for members to discover within their churches those who are best fitted for this important work and to challenge such women and men to give their lives in this service. Another duty is to provide support and guidance to those persons who are preparing for ordained ministry. A further duty is to encourage, support and respect those who serve in the vocation of ordained ministry.

Within this context we make the following affirmation:

We affirm the function and value of the ordained ministry for the nurture and mission of the church.

We affirm the partnership of ordained ministers within the ministry of the whole people of God.

We affirm God's call to individuals for the ordained ministry and God's leading as churches discern that call.

We affirm the value of the ordination process and the nurture and care of ordained persons.

We affirm the faithful men and women who serve the Church in the vocation of the ordained ministry and who bear the crucial responsibilities inherent in that vocation.

---

Adopted by the General Board of the American Baptist Churches - December 1989

154 For, 0 Against, 2 Abstentions

Modified by the General Board Executive Committee - September 1992

Modified by the General Board Executive Committee - September 1997

Modified by the General Board Executive Committee - September 2002

(General Board Reference #7041:9/89)

**All Scripture quotations are from the Revised Standard Version**