

“IT TAKES A WHILE FOR PEOPLE’S HEARTS TO CATCH UP WITH
THEIR HEADS”: WOMEN’S ORDINATION IN THE BAPTIST
CONVENTION OF ONTARIO AND QUEBEC

Taylor Murray
Tyndale University, Toronto, ON

Leanne Friesen
Canadian Baptists of Ontario and Quebec, Toronto, ON

Introduction

Although many Baptists in Ontario and Quebec today take pride in their denomination’s willingness to ordain women, the journey toward the participation and acceptance of female ministers was not a straightforward one.¹ Various historians have noted that the Baptist Convention of Ontario and Quebec (BCOQ) ordained its first woman in 1947, but few recognize that it did not ordain another until 1979.² Complicating this legacy further is the fact that the first woman ordained by the BCOQ, Muriel Spurgeon (1922–2023; later Muriel Spurgeon Carder), had no intention of ministering in a Canadian congregation upon ordination, which both made her a relatively inoffensive candidate and ensured that the issue of women’s ordination would remain a theoretical question for most Baptists in the region for several decades. Indeed, it was not until years later, when other Evangel-

1. In 2008, the Baptist Convention of Ontario and Quebec (BCOQ) changed its name to the Canadian Baptists of Ontario and Quebec (CBOQ). This paper retains this historical usage (BCOQ).

2. E.g., Heath, Friesen, and Murray, *Baptists in Canada*, 72–73; and Brackney, *Baptists in North America*, 241. Notably, Harry Renfree’s influential history of Baptists in Canada makes only passing reference to women’s ordination (see, e.g., *Heritage and Horizon*, 251) and mentions it only to discuss ordination councils.

icals began to grapple with the issue of women's ordination, that the BCOQ was forced to deal with the issue of women's ordination more tangibly than it had in the past, which resulted in a decision officially to ordain women to active ministry in a church context. These observations complicate the story of women's ordination among Baptists in Ontario and Quebec and show that the BCOQ was much more reticent to accept women's ordination fully than is commonly realized.

The purpose of this article, therefore, is twofold. First, to provide a history of the ordination of women in the BCOQ. The absence of any meaningful description of this event and its aftermath is a significant lacuna in the existing literature. Second, to identify the reasons for the apparent cognitive dissonance between policy and practice that effectively stymied progress for women in the BCOQ for upward of three decades. That there was an extended period of time between these ordinations was not unique to the BCOQ, and, in fact, it reflected the lived reality for women in numerous other denominations as well.³ Still, this more than three-decade gap raises obvious questions about the attitudes toward women's ordination within BCOQ churches at the time, and it warrants exploration. Similar to what Valerie J. Korinek has documented in her study on women's ordination in the United Church of Canada, while the denomination was willing to ordain women, it does not mean the churches were prepared to accept this practice.⁴ To trace this history, this paper begins by exploring early perspectives on women's ordination in the BCOQ before documenting the ordinations in 1947 and 1979 and their individual contexts. Although the BCOQ signalled that it was ready to ordain women as early as the 1940s, this paper shows that it was a qualified acceptance that did not necessarily reflect the larger denominational constituency and was not tangibly ratified for several decades.

3. E.g., Maxwell, "'You Can't, 'Cause You're a Girl,'" 62; and Chaves, *Ordaining Women*.

4. Korinek, "No Women Need Apply."

Early Attitudes

During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Baptists in Ontario and Quebec were not unique in their view of the role of women in the church. Across the denominational spectrum in Canada, women were barred from most forms of professional ministry. For many of their male counterparts, there was no ambiguity in the Apostle Paul's admonition: "Let your women keep silence in the churches . . . for it is a shame for women to speak in the church" (1 Cor 14:34–35, KJV).⁵ Naturally, this restriction included ordained ministry.⁶ Yet, at the same time, by the turn of the twentieth century, women in various Canadian denominations had also managed to carve out a significant place in the life of the church as fundraisers, missionaries, teachers, and activists; and they operated through various societies, auxiliaries, and circles with increasing independence and authority.⁷ These changes reflected similar shifts that were occurring in Canadian society during this period, as a greater number of women were beginning to enter the workforce. While the era's cultural expectations still limited what women could or could not do in both church and society at large,⁸ opportunities that had once been closed to women were slowly opening. As Judith Colwell sums, it was during this period that "Women moved from anonymity to ex-

5. E.g., Joshua Denovan, "Woman's Sphere and Work," *The Canadian Baptist* (15 June 1893), 1.

6. There were notable exceptions, including among Baptists in Canada. Pat Townsend has recently discovered that Reformed Baptists in New Brunswick ordained Ella Kinney Sanders in 1901. Another early example was Jennie Johnson, who was ordained by Free Will Baptists in Michigan in 1909, but spent several years serving in Ontario. These cases were exceptional and anomalous, however, and did not reflect the larger trends in Canadian Christianity. For resources on these figures, see Reid-Maroney, *Reverend Jennie Johnson*; and Mullen, "I Believe", 338–40.

7. For a few important studies on women in Canadian Christianity during this period, see Whiteley, *Canadian Methodist Women*; Cook, "Through Sunshine and Shadow"; Gagan, *Sensitive Independence*; and Brouwer, *New Women for God*. Esther Barnes (*Our Heritage*) chronicles the contributions that women made among Baptists in Ontario and Quebec but does not give much attention to the issues described in this article.

8. Strong-Boag, "Janey Canuck", 7–10.

pression of their faith in daily church life that fell just short of actual ordained ministry.”⁹

The first documented BCOQ-wide discussion on the ordination of women did not begin until 1929. These discussions were part of a larger trend in Canadian Christianity. During the same period, other denominations grappled with whether or not it was appropriate and theologically permissible to admit women to professional ministry. Among the first was the United Church of Canada, which, only eleven years after forming, opened the ordination process to women in 1936.¹⁰ For their part, the BCOQ entered into discussion on the topic at the annual convention gathering of 1929 when Hugh McDiarmid, a pastor from Toronto, moved that the convention adopt a resolution calling for the establishment of a committee to discuss the issue of women’s ordination. The resolution stated,

Whereas we appreciate the work of womanhood in the varied ministries of the Christian Church; and Whereas several young women have served most acceptably under the appointment of our Home Mission Board; and Whereas we are informed that certain young women of our communion have expressed their purpose to seek a place in the regular pastorate of our churches: Therefore, be it resolved, that while recognizing the right of any local church to call and ordain whom it will, we deem it advisable that, before any such specific case Comes before us, our Convention should pronounce upon the principle of the ordination of women.¹¹

According to the resolution, the question of women’s ordination had been prompted by several “young women” in the convention who had expressed their interest in ordination. Unfortunately, very little is known about these prospective candidates, but their alleged existence is significant if for no other reason than that it shows that this was a growing concern within the BCOQ in certain circles.

9. Colwell, “Role of Women,” 51.

10. For an important study on this topic, see Korinek, “No Women Need Apply.”

11. MacLeod, ed., *Baptist Year Book for Ontario, Quebec and Western Canada, 1929*, 54, 68.

The resolution’s recognition of “the right of any local church to call and ordain whom it will” is also worth noting. The BCOQ’s decision to open a discussion on women’s ordination should be viewed in its larger context of a significant change that was occurring in the convention at the time: the move to a centralized standing ordination council. Indeed, out of a desire to ensure that Baptist pastors ordained in the convention met a certain level of competency, the BCOQ had introduced plans to institute a standing council, comprised of at least one member from each regional association and whomever else the convention delegates elected.¹² The plan to restructure and ultimately centralize the convention’s ordination process required a discussion on the basic requirements for ministry, which included whether the convention would officially open this process to women.

The resolution proceeded to identify possible members who might sit on this proposed committee. Among them were several notable stalwarts of the BCOQ at the time, including R. R. McKay, president of the convention; A. L. McCrimmon, former chancellor of McMaster University; George T. Webb, superintendent of religious education; Jessie E. Zavitz, the president of the Women’s Baptist Home Mission Society of Ontario West; Maud Matthews, prominent laywoman and wife of the future Lieutenant Governor of Ontario; H. Edgar Allen from Aylmer; D. D. Gray from Ottawa; and E. D. Lang from Kitchener.¹³ It is worth noting the presence of women on the proposed committee. Although clearly outnumbered by men, Zavitz and Matthews provided a feminine voice that was not always present in these kinds of discussions.

As McDiarmid’s resolution concluded, it again addressed the local church. It closed: “We recommend that in the meantime all churches within the Convention refrain from taking action on this matter until after the Convention of 1930 has dealt with the

12. MacLeod, ed., *Baptist Year Book for Ontario, Quebec and Western Canada, 1929*, 56–57.

13. MacLeod, ed., *Baptist Year Book for Ontario, Quebec and Western Canada, 1929*, 69.

said Commission's report."¹⁴ While this closing sentence—and the resolution as a whole—seemed to suggest that the move toward women's ordination was both inevitable and imminent, it was likely just a reflection of the plan to restructure the ordination process. The resolution passed, and the stage was set to consider the convention's proposal.

Even though women's ordination was obviously a provocative topic, the denominational press, *The Canadian Baptist*, was notably silent on the resolution and its ramifications. Outside of the occasional comment within the newspaper about the work of female missionaries being "precious beyond all estimate,"¹⁵ the closest the newspaper came to weighing in on the debate was its comments on the ordination council itself; yet the question of women's ordination did not seem to come into play in criticisms of this group.¹⁶

The decision to remain silent on the topic is a curious one; however, there are a few possible reasons for this omission. First, it should be remembered that the convention had only recently emerged from the fundamentalist-modernist controversy, which was a significant theological crisis that wreaked havoc on denominational unity and saw the expulsion or exodus of seventy-seven churches.¹⁷ Opening the ordination process to women might be considered a "liberal" shibboleth, which the denomination's critics could use to justify its attacks and even pursue legal action.¹⁸ Second, limited exposure in the press may reflect the

14. MacLeod, ed., *Baptist Year Book for Ontario, Quebec and Western Canada, 1929*, 54, 68.

15. C. J. Cameron, "The Woman Missionary," *The Canadian Baptist* (22 August 1929), 6.

16. "Three Problems for Churches to Solve," *The Canadian Baptist* (24 April 1930), 15.

17. For more on this controversy, see Adams, "War of the Worlds"; and Adams, "Great Contention." For a study that looks at the role women played in the Baptist fundamentalist community in Ontario during these years, see Murray, "Call."

18. At the time, due to the Baptist principle of the independence of the local congregation, the BCOQ faced legal issues over the ownership of some of its churches and properties, most notably Hughson Street Baptist Church in Hamilton, Ontario. If the convention advocated for a contentious theological

reality that it was an incidental point in the larger conversation on the ordination council itself. By forming a standing council and giving it authority over who would be approved for ordination, the BCOQ was effectively removing a responsibility typically left to the discretion of the local church and giving it to the larger convention body. The resolution's plea to the individual churches, then, reflected the proposed shift in the equilibrium of power: from church to convention. While women's ordination was most certainly a point of discussion within some churches, the conversation on women's ordination during this time may not have resulted from impassioned activists seeking change in the convention and instead was a symptom of the larger conversation.

Due to the limited discussion of the ordination of women in the press, it is difficult to know the environment in which the "Special Committee on the Ordination of Women" found itself heading into the annual convention gathering of 1930. With the Baptists assembled, R. R. McKay, chair of the special committee, presented their findings. Prefacing his comments with the fact that there was no clear precedent for ordaining women among other denominations in Canada and that it had not been practiced by any known Baptist groups, he presented a report that read,

while recognizing that women are doing an unspeakably valuable work as Sunday School teachers, district visitors, settlement workers, deaconesses, Bible women, missionaries, etc., and while not presuming to circumscribe definitely the religious activities of women, nor from exegesis of Scriptures relevant, to the equality of all believers and kindred subjects to give particularized applications, regarding the restrictions on women's speaking in 1 Corinthians as being occa-

position, their opponents could hypothetically argue that they were not truly Baptist. This was the tactic of fundamentalists in Nova Scotia only a few years later. See Murray, "Exodus to Exile"; and Murray, "From United Baptist to Independent Baptist." In 1947, when the BCOQ did move forward with the ordination of Muriel Spurgeon, fundamentalist Baptists responded characteristically. Put simply: it was further evidence that the convention had apostatized. For a representative example, see "Convention Approves Ordination of Women," *The Gospel Witness* (19 June 1947), 3.

sioned by the social and religious condition of women generally in Corinth and by the apostle's anxiety for the preservation of existing domestic relationships rather than from a wish to suppress women prophets, your Committee does not think that there is, either demand or need, especially at the present time, for beginning a practice which is so entirely new to us as a people.¹⁹

While the denominational minutes do not record the conversation that followed, it is noteworthy that one Convention pastor, John Galt from Oshawa, immediately added an amendment:

Whereas; for four hundred years Baptists have consistently recognized and taught the equality of all believers and have never questioned the right of women to take active part in the work and worship of the Church; and whereas Baptists have freely appointed women to represent the Churches at Associations and at Conventions; and whereas Baptists have sent women forth to preach the Gospel to the heath; to teach Christian Doctrine and to have the oversight of churches; and whereas these women messengers faced every difficulty; endured ever hardship and dare every danger equally with men; and whereas the Holy Scripture clearly shows that it pleased God to call women to prophetic office both under law and under grace as instance under Miriam; Deborah; Huldah; Anna; and four daughters of Philip the Evangelist; therefore: be it resolved that the Convention express its approval of the ordination of women on equal terms with men; that is to say, in instances in which there is full proof that God has called them to the work of the Gospel Ministry.²⁰

One report from the Convention gathering noted that this amendment sparked an “extended discussion on this important question.”²¹ Ultimately, however, the amendment was defeated, and the convention delegates adopted the committee’s report as presented: women would not be ordained as there was no “need” to do so (the wording of the resolution—namely that the committee believed there was no “need” for women ministers—is ironic,

19. MacLeod, ed., *Baptist Year Book for Ontario, Quebec and Western Canada, 1930*, 252.

20. MacLeod, ed., *Baptist Year Book for Ontario, Quebec and Western Canada, 1930*, 42–43.

21. “The Baptist Convention for Ontario and Quebec: James St. Baptist Church, Hamilton,” *The Canadian Baptist* (30 October 1930), 4.

given the fact that *The Canadian Baptist* had printed an article just one week ahead of the convention gathering about the "great need" for more Baptist ministers²²).

Although ordained ministry was closed to them for the time being, women made several other strides within the denomination in the years that followed this discussion. In October 1935, the convention elected its first woman to the council executive as Vice President, Maud Matthews, the abovementioned former member of the special committee on women's ordination.²³ At this same convention, Mrs. J. Hooper argued that since women served as delegates, they should be placed on its board and committees; the delegates responded by electing two women to the resolutions committee.²⁴ Moreover, that year, Baptists in the region entered into a discussion on the idea of women serving as deacons; one impassioned letter to the editor published in *The Canadian Baptist* suggested, however, that this should have long ceased being an issue at all, and urged churches not to exclude gifted people from any form of leadership.²⁵

The First Woman Ordained

The BCOQ suspended the question on women's ordination for the remainder of the 1930s and did not earnestly address it again until the middle of the next decade when, in 1944, Muriel Spurgeon came before the credentials committee to express her

22. "Men for the Ministry," *The Canadian Baptist* (23 October 1930), 3.

23. "First Woman Vice President," *The Canadian Baptist* (31 October 1935), 3.

24. MacLeod, ed., *Baptist Year Book for Ontario, Quebec and Western Canada, 1935*, 31. Unfortunately, we have been unable to locate Ms. Hooper's first name, therefore, we have retained the traditional usage of "Mrs."

25. Marjorie Anderson, "Editor's Mailbag," *The Canadian Baptist* (21 February 1935), 15. Baptist polity generally meant that the question of women serving in the diaconate was left to the discretion of each individual congregation. For a good example of the wide range of perspectives, note the difference between First Cornwallis Baptist Church in Nova Scotia and Brunswick Street Baptist Church in New Brunswick, which first accepted women as deacons in 1919 and 2010, respectively. See Lohnes, "First Cornwallis Baptist Church"; and Atkinson, "Brunswick Street Baptist Church."

interest in pursuing a Bachelor of Divinity degree with the intention of seeking ordination.²⁶ On one level, ordination seemed like the next natural step in the expanding place of women in Canadian Christianity; however, complicating this question was a trend toward the renewal of traditional gender roles in North American society in the mid-twentieth century—a process that some historians have identified as the “return to domesticity.”²⁷ Following the Second World War, society and the media placed increasing emphasis on family life, and there was a marked return to traditional perspectives on gender. Women married sooner, had children at younger ages, and were less likely to seek higher education and careers. Spurgeon did not fit this mould. Born in England on 1 November 1922, she was a distant relative of the famous English Baptist “Prince of Preachers,” Charles Spurgeon.²⁸ After settling in Canada with her family, she enrolled at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario, the BCOQ’s traditional training ground, where she received a Bachelor of Arts in Greek and Latin in 1944. By all accounts, she was a bright and assertive woman with a strong personality. In the words of a reporter from *The Toronto Star*, she was also “tolerant and less conservative than many of her fellow Baptists.”²⁹

As Spurgeon approached the final year of her Bachelor of Divinity degree at McMaster, the topic again came to the forefront. In the denominational records for 1946–1947, the “Report of the Advisory Council on Ministerial Training, Ordinations, Credentials and Discipline” wrote of the special concern that had come before them regarding women students preparing for min-

26. At the time of writing, there is no scholarly biography on Spurgeon (later Spurgeon Carder). For biographical information, see Fox, “The Heart and Soul of Mission in India,” *Canadian Baptist Archives* (hereafter CBA), 8.

27. E.g., Stephen, *Pick One Intelligent Girl*, 163–204. For an influential work from the period that diagnosed this trend, see Friedan, *Feminine Mystique*, 15–32.

28. Brackney (*Baptists in North America*, 152) makes this observation, though the exact nature of how they were related is unclear. The same claim is found in “Miss Muriel Spurgeon,” *The Canadian Baptist* (1 November 1947), 11.

29. “Miss Spurgeon Described,” *The Toronto Star* (14 June 1947).

istry. When presented to the larger convention body, one report from the press noted that it resulted in a "fine-spirited discussion," before adding that the majority in attendance were in favour of moving ahead with women's ordination "provided that these candidates fulfil the highest standards now required of men."³⁰ As a result, the council recommended that the BCOQ establish a special committee for the admission of women and maintained that the group should also authorize women missionaries (instead of the Home Missions Board, which had previously been the case).³¹ This proposal was significant, as it meant women would have to undergo the same credentialing process as men, even to serve as missionaries.

One year later, in 1947, Spurgeon became the first woman to undergo this process. As she was the first woman to approach the ordination council seriously, the group developed what would be a precedent-setting policy in their decision about her. They declared,

We as a council in line to view that so far as the ordination is a matter of theory, there is not sufficient ground, in the New Testament evidence or Christian conviction, to deny the ordination of women who are properly qualified on the ground of (1) character, (2) inner call, (3) formal training, (4) willingness of Christian company to accept pastoral oversight at their hands.³²

The council's decision to characterize the debate as "a matter of theory" is an interesting one. Talking of ordination as "theory" was not uncommon among Baptists, and the BCOQ occasionally used it to refer to the concept itself.³³ That said, given this particular context, it is possible that it carried something of a double meaning: women had never been admitted to the ordination process in the past, so, in the council's eyes, it was perhaps still a

30. "59th Annual Convention," *The Canadian Baptist* (1 July 1947), 10.

31. Bingham, ed., *Canadian Baptist Yearbook*, 202.

32. Advisory Council on Ordinations, Credentials and Discipline, "Report of the Advisory Council," CBA.

33. For example, see "The Baptist Position," *The Canadian Baptist* (15 May 1947), 9.

theoretical question, which further gives the impression that they approached the decision as an academic exercise.

The council's decision sparked an hour-long debate from which we can glean several interesting details. First, it is noteworthy that no women took part in the discussion. In contrast to the earlier committee to discuss women's ordination in 1929–1930—which included two women—this reality was a corollary of the fact that no women sat on the ordination council, which, given that to date no woman had been ordained, was not necessarily surprising. Second, those present were kept from knowing Spurgeon's identity to avoid prejudice toward the topic based on her character. Of particular concern was Spurgeon's views on dances that had taken place at McMaster. One report circulated in the press at the time noted that Spurgeon had stated: "You talk about young people going wrong because they dance. I believe many more young people go wrong because their parents will not let them go to dances," before continuing, "All they can do then is park and pet. We are not allowed to have liquor at the dances here."³⁴ Thus, keeping the candidate's identity anonymous came out of a desire to safeguard the integrity of the process.

A third interesting point about the discussion was that the substance of the debate was not built on scriptural principles.³⁵ According to one report, during the meeting, "no one had gone to the Scriptures."³⁶ Instead, those who were antagonistic toward women's ordination in part based their criticism on other requirements of the job, including the fact that a woman would not be physically strong enough to perform the ordinance of baptism. When asked why a woman could not perform baptisms, A. J. Vining, council member and well-known denominational official, replied:

34. As quoted in "Miss Muriel Spurgeon," *The Gospel Witness* (19 June 1947), 3.

35. Ross Harkness, "Rev. Muriel Spurgeon Sure She Can Baptize Men," *Hamilton Star* (14 June 1947).

36. "Convention Approves Ordination of Women," *The Gospel Witness*, (19 June 1947), 3.

Because she couldn't. Because she doesn't know how. I've known some men to make a mess of baptism and a woman would make a bigger mess of it. I've known men to splash the water around. It's too solemn and beautiful a thing to let women make a mess of it.³⁷

To this, C. R. Duncan, fellow council member, retorted:

The only argument against this is the one that rose in my own heart and that I silenced long ago. It is this: I don't like the idea of a woman being my minister or pastor. That argument has no validity. It is just a prejudice. Probably not many churches will want a woman pastor . . . Well let them, but that is prejudice. Even if we ordain woman, those who do not want a woman minister will not have to have one. If it doesn't work out, we can depend on the wisdom of our women not to seek ordination.³⁸

Interestingly, his statement about churches not hiring a woman minister if they did not want one proved quite prescient, as will be illustrated later. Although one council member asked for a year to defer the debate, the motion was defeated, and the report passed with a large majority. Spurgeon then assured reporters that she was confident of her ability to baptize a male adult, as she had heard that the weight of a man in the baptismal water was only 35 pounds!³⁹

Although the examining council had set a precedent for women's ordination, the notion of congregational independence enshrined in Baptist polity meant that the final decision to ordain Spurgeon rested with her own church. On 16 September 1947, Spurgeon attended her examination council at King Street Baptist Church in Kitchener. She attended the meeting feeling confident, believing, "If God wants this, it will happen; If God

37. As quoted in Ross Harkness, "Rev. Muriel Spurgeon Sure She Can Baptize Men," *Hamilton Star* (14 June 1947).

38. As quoted in Ross Harkness, "Rev. Muriel Spurgeon Sure She Can Baptize Men," *Hamilton Star* (14 June 1947).

39. Ross Harkness, "Rev. Muriel Spurgeon Sure She Can Baptize Men," *Hamilton Star* (14 June 1947).

doesn't want this, it won't."⁴⁰ The vote passed, and the church held a service of ordination that same evening. H. S. Stewart, the Dean of McMaster's Department of Theology, recommended her to the mission board, saying he felt confident she would make an excellent minister. A month after her ordination, Spurgeon sailed for India, where she spent much of her career.⁴¹

Again, references to this landmark event in both the denominational record and press were surprisingly muted. In the "Report from the Advisory Council," the *Yearbook* quietly reported Spurgeon's ordination and added her name to its list of ministers.⁴² *The Link and Visitor*—the primary organ of the Baptist women's missionary board—and *The Canadian Baptist* carried articles that reported news of her ordination and celebrated their first ordained woman but made little comment on the profundity of the decision.⁴³ Furthermore, there was little apparent response from the public in letters to the editor or other columns responding to Spurgeon's new position. Yet, silence did not equate acceptance, and the lack of opposition in the minutes or the press did not mean the cause of women's ordination had come to a close with a happy ending for those in favour of women's ordination in the BCOQ.

A Second Ordination

After Spurgeon, the BCOQ did not ordain another woman for another 32 years.⁴⁴ On 20 October 1979, *The Toronto Star* re-

40. Fox, "The Heart and Soul of Mission in India," CBA, 8. This perspective governed Spurgeon's view of ministry. See Muriel Spurgeon, "My Call to Missionary Service," *The Canadian Baptist* (15 July 1947), 9.

41. Details in this paragraph are found in Roy and Watts, "Report on the Working Group on Equality in Ministry," CBA, 3. For another brief resource on Spurgeon's ordination and ministry afterwards, see Barnes, *Our Heritage*, 164–65.

42. Bingham, ed., *Canadian Baptist Yearbook*, 202.

43. E.g., "Miss Muriel Spurgeon," *The Canadian Baptist* (1 November 1947), 11.

44. See "Claire Holmes Ordained in Kingsway," *The Link and Visitor*, (December 1979), 12.

ported that Kingsway Baptist Church, Toronto, “broke new ground” by ordaining the first woman in the BCOQ in over three decades.⁴⁵ Born in Hamilton, Ontario, in 1952, Claire Holmes attended McMaster University and was ordained as Associate Pastor of Kingsway Baptist. By this time, Spurgeon Carder—her married name—had returned to Canada, but was serving as a chaplain, which made Holmes the only ordained woman serving in a pastoral office in either Ontario or Quebec. Furthermore, she was one of only five Baptist women ordained in all of Canada, and one of only three serving in a pastoral position.⁴⁶ In response to the length of time between the ordinations of Spurgeon Carder and Holmes, the president of the BCOQ quipped: “It takes a while for people’s hearts to catch up with their heads,” implying that church attitudes had simply not “caught up” to denominational policy until this point.⁴⁷ He further conceded that many of the women in training at the time would have difficulty finding placements in churches, as people continued to struggle with the idea of a woman pastoring a church. He said, “Church leadership is keen on that, but, out in the churches, people’s attitudes change more slowly.”⁴⁸

The time between Spurgeon Carder’s ordination and that of Holmes was not lost on the former. Spurgeon Carder took part in the ordination service and gave her own opinion on why three decades had passed: “It was partly due to the climate of opinion, but also to the fact that the Baptist Church is better at making theoretical decisions than carrying them out. Added to this was the fact that I went to India and so was not visible as a woman.”⁴⁹ Her assessment echoed the ordination council’s perspec-

45. Tom Harpur, “Baptist Minister is a Rarity, But She is No Women’s Libber,” *Toronto Star* (20 October 1979), H6.

46. Tom Harpur, “Baptist Minister is a Rarity, But She is No Women’s Libber,” *Toronto Star* (20 October 1979), H6.

47. Tom Harpur, “Baptist Minister is a Rarity, But She is No Women’s Libber,” *Toronto Star* (20 October 1979), H6.

48. Tom Harpur, “Baptist Minister is a Rarity, But She is No Women’s Libber,” *Toronto Star* (20 October 1979), H6.

49. As quoted in Tom Harpur, “Baptist Minister is a Rarity, But She is No Women’s Libber,” *Toronto Star* (20 October 1979), H6.

tive that the debate over her ordination was really “a matter of theory.” The fact that she left Canada shortly after becoming ordained, Spurgeon Carder noted, essentially meant that it remained a theoretical question even after she had been accepted for ordination.

Unlike the cultural context in which Spurgeon Carder had been ordained, the increased role of women in public life was also becoming more normal. When one considers why a renewed interest in women’s ordination occurred during the 1970s, it seems reasonably clear to suggest that the women’s movement had some part to play in a revived interest in women’s careers, and their equality in various professions. This was visible in many other denominations in Canada at the time. In 1975, for example, the Anglican Church was part of an ongoing debate about women ministers, which plateaued when female members vocally considered a lawsuit against the church for discrimination based on the church’s unwillingness to ordain women as priests. Similarly, although the United Church had ordained women for several years, it was reported that there was “an unhappy gap between the ideal and the reality,” as no woman had held a senior position in a prestigious church until 1975.⁵⁰ The Presbyterian Church had opened the ordination process to women in 1966 (although the first woman was not ordained until 1978), while the Pentecostal Church of Canada still did not consider women for ordination.

That more denominations were grappling with the issue is visible in the various debates that occupied other Baptist bodies during the 1970s and 1980s.⁵¹ Most prominently, this era was the beginning of what various observers have called the “conservative resurgence” in the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC). Discussion on the role of women in the church had been prompted by the pronounced place feminism had occupied in the cultural milieu since the 1960s. By 1979, the SBC was locked in a bitter

50. Sheila Kieran, “Are Women More Equal in the Church?” *Chatelaine*, (March 1975), 76.

51. This was true of many Evangelical bodies. See Blumhofer, “Confused Legacy,” 60.

conflict over the denomination's future, and one of the core issues was "the woman question."⁵² While the BCOQ did not experience the same degree of bitter division over this issue,⁵³ the controversy from the SBC (the largest Baptist body in the world) soon spilled into other, smaller Baptist denominations, who began to grapple with it as well.⁵⁴ In *The Canadian Baptist* May 1979 issue, for example, an article bemoaned the lack of women serving in congregations in light of the denomination's official policy of ordaining women. It read: "There is nothing in our theology of the church which says that some members can be 'ordained,' and others can not . . . Our practice, of course, does not correspond to our ecclesiology."⁵⁵ The author then went on to state: "If [women] are forced out of the ministry, or out of our Baptist family, they will suffer a grave injustice for which we will all bear some of the responsibility."⁵⁶ Respondents to this article challenged its claim based on scriptural grounds.⁵⁷ The passion of this discussion might make it seem as if this was the first time the BCOQ had confronted the issue of women's ordination, even though the denomination had been "officially" ordaining women for over thirty years.

To address the remaining theological and cultural concerns that served as a barrier to women's ordination, in 1978, the

52. Flowers, *Into the Pulpit*.

53. E.g., An independent national survey of Baptist ministers from 1979 showed that 60 percent of ordained Baptist pastors in the BCOQ believed that the ordination of women had biblical support and therefore also supported it, and 12 percent believed the New Testament was against it, but they still supported it. This was compared to 28 percent who did not believe there was scriptural support and therefore opposed it (see Beverley, "National Survey," 275).

54. Melody Maxwell has documented the significant discussions as they took place among Baptists in Atlantic Canada, who made particularly effective use of their denominational press. See Maxwell, "Proceed with Care"; and Maxwell, "'You Can't, 'Cause You're a Girl.'"

55. G. G. Harrop, "A New Duty for a New Occasion," *The Canadian Baptist* (May 1979), 8-9.

56. G. G. Harrop, "A New Duty for a New Occasion," *The Canadian Baptist* (May 1979), 8-9.

57. E.g., David J. McKinley, "Letter to the Editor," *The Canadian Baptist* (September 1979), 8.

BCOQ developed a “Task Force on Women in Ministry.” The task force consisted of thirteen individuals (seven regularly elected members and five *ex-officio* members). Among the regularly elected members were Holmes and Spurgeon Carder.⁵⁸ Its stated purpose was to research the current status of women in ministry and to develop policies to promote the use of women in ministry in the congregations. In one of its earliest meetings, the task force agreed that “the greatest hurdle to full acceptance of Women in Ministry relates to the attitudinal response of the people in the local congregation.”⁵⁹ Citing the need for research on “both sides” of the position, they suggested an emphasis on Bible study, a review of cultural expectations, and a reassessment of the recruitment, training, and support of students coming into ministry in light of the needs and the kind of employment available to them.⁶⁰ Their final report eventually called for renewed education and teaching in churches to encourage positive attitudes towards women in ministry.⁶¹

Conclusion

The preceding narrative exposes several factors in the disconnect between official policy and denominational practice. As noted by Spurgeon Carder herself, since she was ordained as a missionary, it kept the denomination from dealing with women ministers in their “regular” congregations. Her plans for the ministry made her a relatively innocuous first female candidate for ordination.

58. The other members were Murray J. S. Ford (Chair), Fanshun Watts, John Coutts, Glen Barrett, George Scott, Audrey Manuel, Ron Watts, Ken Morrison, H. Lewis, and L. V. Hultgren (Meeting of the BCOQ Department of the Ministry, Thursday, 27 March 1980, CBA, 87).

59. Ford, “Task Force on Women in Ministry: Minutes” (5 June 1978), CBA. Likewise, in late 1979, they noted that “the greatest task is that of educating our churches that they give equal consideration to women candidates” (Meeting of the BCOQ Department of the Ministry, Thursday, 1 November 1979, CBA, 87).

60. Ford, “Task Force on Women in Ministry: Minutes,” 5 June 1978, CBA.

61. Ford, “Report to the Department of the Ministry on Behalf of the Task Force on Women in Ministry,” n.d., CBA.

The fact that the denominational press dealt with her case so sparingly would seem to indicate that the event was of little genuine consequence for the life of the convention, even though it was a historic and monumental decision. Moreover, one must consider the attitudes of the individual churches. As A. C. Duncan stated during the debate over ordination in 1947, due to Baptist polity, churches did not have to ordain someone that they did not wish to ordain.⁶² Therefore, whatever public policy may have been, it is evident that the attitudes of individual churches played a significant role in Baptist circles regarding whether or not a woman found a place to be ordained. It was not until the cultural and religious setting had sufficiently changed that the BCOQ tangibly ratified its decision to ordain women to ministry. These observations show that the BCOQ was much more reluctant to accept women’s ordination than historians commonly recognize.

Attitudes on women’s ordination have changed since the early twentieth century, and while it remains a sensitive topic for some, it has lost some of its stigma. Notably, in 2023, the Canadian Baptists of Ontario and Quebec (CBOQ; formerly the BCOQ) appointed a woman—with unanimous approval—to the position of Executive Minister for the first time in Canadian Baptist history. At the same time, although the number of women ministers has increased in the CBOQ since the period under review, the ordained ministry remains largely male-dominated. Today, with the precedents of women like Spurgeon Carder and Holmes, it is likely that the greatest barrier is the continued congregational attitudes towards women in ministry. Indeed, even for churches that support women in ministry, many remain reluctant to call a woman to their own congregation. It is not the purpose of this paper to diagnose the state of Baptist churches today; however, it may serve to provide a historical backdrop for these kinds of conversations.

62. Duncan quote from Ross Harkness, “Rev. Muriel Spurgeon Sure She Can Baptize Men,” *Hamilton Star* (14 June 1947).

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