



## RESOURCES:

### Her voice, her experiences. Why do they matter?

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By Rev. Dr. Christine A. Smith

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Since 1987, when Congress passed "Public Law 100-9," [designating March](#) as "Women's History Month," many have paused to acknowledge, learn about, and celebrate the numerous contributions of women in America. During this time when we honor women, it is important to reflect upon both the victories experienced, as well as the challenges we continue to face. It is critical that we engage in conversations, develop strategies, and remain intentional about addressing structures that continue to devalue, oppress, and marginalize women in general and women of color, in particular.

**Since 1951, American Baptist Women's Ministries has been the sole organization within the American Baptist family that has a singular focus upon "uniting American Baptist women in their devotion to Jesus Christ." ABWM is intentional about lifting, empowering, and advancing the voices and causes of women and girls across the United States, including Puerto Rico. We "show up" in the lives of women and girls in tangible ways. Through life-changing ministries such as domestic violence prevention trainings, scholarships for both secular and ministerial education, S.T.E.A.M. programs for girls, webinars and conferences, natural disaster relief and so much more, ABWM is making a difference!**

**Both American Baptist Women's Ministries and American Baptist Women in Ministry are necessary institutions that continue to open doors for lay and clergy women. They not only open doors but create opportunities for women to have seats at tables, and voices that are taken seriously in the room.** If we are genuinely concerned about continuing the progress that has been made regarding equity and inclusion of women at all levels across sectors, we must do everything possible to ensure the vitality of these two important women's organizations. Women leaders need to be respected partners who play major roles in decisions, strategies, and policies that shape visions and influence realities.

Women have always had a voice. From the origins of human time and space, in both biblical and secular history, women have used their voices. In the garden, in the home, in the "village," among one another, in the Church, and in the public square, women have spoken. Their voices, however, have not always been valued or heard. Centuries of patriarchal systems that relegated women's voices to limited, designated spaces, or characterized women's voices as senseless chatter or evil seduction, created barriers that persist for women today.

To God be the glory, we have many examples across the ages and in modern societies of trailblazing women who have defied systems and broken secular and ecclesiastical barriers. Within the American Baptist family, we are excited to highlight our most recent victory of a major glass ceiling that has been broken, embodied in the person of the [Rev. Dr. Gina Jacobs-Strain](#) – our FIRST ever woman and person of color to be called to serve as the ABCUSA General Secretary. We do not have time to unpack all that this means in this article! Of note is the glaring reality that in 2024, we are still bumping up against these ceilings.

Some will argue that women in general, and people of color in particular, are making great strides and we should tone down the conversations regarding systemic barriers that are very much in force and alive. Some have even asked, "Why are we still discussing this?" This discussion is necessary for the purposes of revealing the major challenges that remain for many women, especially Black and Brown women leaders in America.

The intersection of gender, race, socioeconomic status, stereotypes, etc., increase harmful stress levels for Black and Brown women leaders. Studies show that there is a strong correlation between structural racism and racial health inequalities. The myriad of challenges experienced by Black and Brown women leaders, related to their intersectional identities have been predominantly ignored in management research. Although they are visible, (able to be physically seen) due to the color of their skin, they remain invisible (essentially ignored) in terms of their ideas, opportunities for promotion, inequitable treatment, and the silencing of their voices. As America comes to grips with generations of practices that advanced opportunities for White America, while perpetuating systems that held back and oppressed minorities in general and Black and Brown Americans in particular, the nonprofit sector is compelled to face its own inequitable practices. If these realities are to be changed, there must be increased awareness, research, and corrective measures to address the preponderance of White male dominated spaces across both for-profit and nonprofit sectors.

Women in general and Black and Brown women in particular, when given the opportunity to lead both sacred and secular institutions, are frequently hired during a time of crisis, structural failings, and economic downturn. This phenomenon is known as the "glass cliff," the notion that women more often than men are appointed to lead unstable, dysfunctional, diminished organizations. Men are often hired to lead organizations at their height. Women are frequently hired to lead organizations near their death.

The voices and experiences of women matter. We are half of the human race. God chose to partner with a woman to bring Jesus into the world. If God entrusted that major role to a woman, I doubt that there's anything this world can come up with to justifiably question our capabilities!

So, the questions arise, "How do we change the trajectory of this pattern? What can we do to disrupt systems and structures that continue to marginalize and silence the legitimate concerns of women of color and all women?" To do so, we must work towards making several things happen:

- We must accept and confront the reality that we have not arrived. While great strides towards equity and inclusion for women have been made, many systemic and structural barriers persist, especially for Black and Brown women.
- We must create greater opportunities for the increase in numbers of intellectual voices of Black and Brown scholars in academia and the church, for the training and preparation of current and future leaders. Concerns continue to be raised by current Black women scholars and students in traditionally European American colleges and universities, regarding the absence or sanitization of intersectionality theory in mainstream literature. The ideologies related to gender and racial inequalities are often watered down to make messages more palatable for fear of the loss of revenue and white fragility. White fragility is the concept that it is difficult, offensive, off-putting, fear inducing, and infuriating for white people to talk about racism. By expanding the body of research in this area, practitioners will have more resources to help them obtain greater levels of knowledge and sensitivity towards the unequal and oppressive conditions endured by minority women leaders. These conditions include workplace bullying due to gender and race, as well as evaluations that are fraught with social dominance orientations.
- Black and white male pastors must do more than offer verbal support of women pastors. There are increasing numbers of male pastors that say they support women pastors. Few, however, actually *lead* their congregations in embracing women preachers fully, and *prepare* their congregations to consider calling a woman upon their retirement or departure. In 2021, Pew Research affirmed the rarity of women being called to be the senior pastor at predominantly Black churches, particularly large ones. Respondents also acknowledged that women commonly manage church committees and hold other important positions, but only a small number of women become senior pastors at predominantly Black churches. When women do become senior pastors, frequently they are called to struggling congregations that are economically depressed, small, and lack sustainable infrastructure. Elements of the "Old Boys Club" continue to loom large. Generations of bad theology still influence whether a woman pastor could even be considered for the pastorate in many Black churches today. Ironically, some of the same "isms" that block Black men from rising to higher heights in a variety of arenas, are used by those *same men* to restrict and relegate women to gender-traditional roles in their churches. Sadly, the oppressed, at times, take on the behaviors of the oppressor.
- Finally, women must determine to break free from patriarchal conditioning that prevents us from wholeheartedly supporting one another. We can point to many examples of how women love, care for, and support one another. We must, however, acknowledge the reality that we too have been plagued by the poisonously "strange fruit" of oppression. Many a woman has been co-opted by men to maintain structures that limit the power, voices, and roles of other women. Women have been strongly encouraged to give major financial support to initiatives led by men, while neglecting their own. Women have been conditioned to keep other sisters "in their place," particularly in churches, by refusing to support them as they pursue higher level or lead positions, traditionally held by men. In the secular realm, in both for-profit and nonprofit organizations, some women participate in pulling other women leaders down, through insubordination, extreme criticisms, and "coup d'états" of sorts to have her removed. Women must be discerning and prayerfully seek to understand when patriarchal conditioning is at play. We must ask ourselves, "Would I have these same criticisms if this were a man? Would I embrace this idea or strategy if it were coming from a man? Are there things I can do to help or support my sister, rather than join others to cut her down? Can I do more to support my own women's organizations and keep them as a priority among my donations?

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