

PORTRAITS OF COURAGE



STORIES OF
BAPTIST HEROES



Julie Whidden Long

ADDIE DAVIS BAPTIST PASTOR



Who: Addie Davis


Where: North Carolina

When: 1917-2005

What she did: First woman minister to be ordained by a Southern Baptist church

August 9, 1964, was a historic day for Baptists. In the same year that Martin Luther King, Jr., won the Nobel Peace prize for his work for human equality, a Baptist church in North Carolina acted to give a woman status equal to a man. On that August day, Watts Street Baptist Church in Durham, North Carolina, ordained Addie Davis to the gospel ministry. Addie and the members of the church did not know that they were making history. They simply thought they were listening to God's voice and following God's calling.

Why was that event so special? Addie's **ordination** was a turning point for some Southern Baptist churches. Southern Baptists, like many other Christian groups, were divided



Ordination is the process of setting apart a man or woman for the ministry. Baptists believe that the local church ordains those whom it believes to be called by God to minister. Ordination is the church's blessing upon a person to perform the rituals and practices of ministry, including preaching, conducting weddings or funerals, and performing the rituals of communion or baptism.

over the role of women as leaders in the church. Northern Baptists had ordained women and had had women pastors since the 1880s. Women all over the country had served as youth ministers, ministers of education, and ministers of music, but no white Southern Baptist women had ever been ordained as

pastors.

By the 1960s, women were beginning to rethink their roles in society. More women were going to college, getting jobs, and finding independence in ways that had been reserved for men. Women were becoming leaders in businesses, education, politics, and in many other areas of society. When Baptist women went to church, they wanted to be leaders there as well. Young Baptist girls began to dream not only of serving God as missionaries but also as local church pastors.

Addie Davis had grown up as a young girl in a Baptist church in Virginia. She faithfully attended church with her family "every time the doors were open." Baptized at age eight, Addie always showed interest in faith and religious activities. At church, Addie learned about Baptist missionaries. She thought that God might be calling her to be a

missionary as well.

But Addie also dreamed to be a pastor like her grandfather. She often practiced preaching to her friends and dolls. Because she had no female role models or encouragement, she kept her dream to herself. Although many years passed before it was fulfilled, her dream remained alive.

Addie grew up and went to Meredith College, a Baptist women's school in Raleigh, North Carolina. She directed a church's education ministry and then became dean of women at a Baptist college.

She decided to go to seminary to become a minister, but her plans were interrupted. When her father died in 1944, she moved back home to help her mother. During this time, she preached at a small church without a pastor.

While she lived with her mother, Addie grew very ill with appendicitis. As she recovered, she promised God and herself that if she lived, she would do what she had always felt in her heart that she should do—preach! Her experience made her want to try again to go to seminary, and she did.

At Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, Addie's



professors helped her and supported her. They also told her that being a female pastor would be very difficult. They were right! When she graduated from seminary, she could not find a Baptist church in the South that would call her to be its pastor. The churches were afraid to be the first to call a woman pastor. She decided to move north to become the pastor of First Baptist Church of Readsboro, Vermont.

Before Addie moved to Vermont, she wanted to be ordained and receive the blessing of her home church. Most Baptists in the South did not agree that women should be ordained as pastors, but since all Baptist churches are free to make their own decisions, no rules prevented a local church from ordaining whom it wished. Even so, the leaders at her home church were afraid that ordaining a woman would cause a controversy. Addie decided to seek ordination elsewhere.

Addie contacted several churches in the area about ordaining her. When she finally talked to Warren Carr, pastor of Watts Street Baptist Church in Durham, she found a supporter. After talking to Addie, Carr believed that God had called her to be a preacher. The congregation discussed and debated the matter and voted to ordain Addie, and she later remarked that “the whole congregation wholeheartedly backed me.”

Many Baptists did not agree with Addie's ordination. Addie and the church received letters from people who disapproved of their decision. Pastor Carr received nearly fifty letters that criticized the church. Addie received letters



Addie at Watts Street Baptist Church in 2004 with the church's pastor, Mel Williams, and associate minister with adults, Diane Hill

(Photo courtesy of Jere Judd)

telling her to give up her ordination. One man told her to learn from her husband, although she never married. Another man called her a “child of the Devil.” Addie never bothered to answer any of the letters. She believed deeply that she was doing what God called her to do. No one could convince her otherwise.

In Vermont, Addie discovered the churches to be more gracious and open towards women leaders. One young



Addie reading scripture
(Photo courtesy of Jere Judd)

girl in Addie's church did not know that men could be ministers because she had only known Addie as her pastor. As the girl and her friends played church, they took turns acting as the minister. When the girl's brother wanted his turn as the preacher, the girl told him, "You can't be the preacher! Only women are preachers!"

Addie went on to serve several churches as pastor. As a minister, she tried to care for people. She showed them compassion. She believed that as a woman, she had special gifts that were different from those of men. She saw ways that her gifts were needed and appreciated. She

was even named Vermont's Pastor of the Year in 1971.

Addie taught other women to use their gifts to serve in ministry. She told them, "We are not carbon copies—each of us is unique, redeemed and called of God to fulfill a particular ministry. BE YOURSELF! . . . Your gift to God and to the people you serve is YOU—you're one of a kind." Addie Davis was one of a kind, and she knew that God had created her for a special purpose.

In 1998, a group called Baptist Women in Ministry, formed by a group of Baptist women ministers who were influenced by Addie's ordination, began presenting the Addie Davis Awards. Each year, these awards are given to outstanding Baptist women ministers in both preaching and pastoral leadership. Many of these Baptist women have been inspired by Addie's story and are carrying on her example and influence as women called and gifted by God.

In 2004, Addie celebrated the fortieth anniversary of her ordination at Watts Street Baptist Church in Durham. She even preached during the service. But soon Addie became ill, and she died December 3, 2005, in her hometown of Covington, Virginia.

Few Baptist women ministers have had as much influence as Baptist hero Addie Davis. Her ordination service marked a new era for Baptists in the South, and it was a historical event for Baptists everywhere.

Addie did not seek ordination to make history or to cause conflict. In fact, at the time of her ordination, she

did not know that she was the first Southern Baptist woman to be ordained. She was not trying to be first. She was only trying to follow the dream that God had placed in her heart as a young girl.

Addie is a Baptist hero because she followed her heart by listening to God's calling for her life. Baptists believe that every individual is free to serve God in the best way he or she knows how. For Addie, the best way was to become a pastor. She believed in her own freedom to follow that dream. She also believed in the local church's freedom to choose to ordain her no matter what others thought. Addie Davis is a Baptist hero because she believed in freedom.

Addie painted a new portrait of leadership for Baptist churches. She became a role model to the many Baptist women who have followed in her footsteps. Since Addie's ordination in 1964, nearly 2,000 Baptist women in the South have been ordained. Most of these women serve as chaplains, others are missionaries or campus ministers, but many serve as associate pastors or even pastors like Addie did. In 2007, 607 women were identified as pastors and co-pastors in Baptist churches in the United States.

Addie gave this advice to women: "Don't give up if you have a call from God to enter the ministry." Even though the task might be hard, God calls both men and women to be faithful to their calling and to follow their dreams.

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Written by Julie Whidden Long, this 128-page book, designed especially for younger youth and older children, presents the stories of Baptist heroes. These heroes lived in various countries and centuries and represent many phases of Baptist life. By highlighting the biographical dimension of the Baptist past, these inspiring stories help readers appreciate the personal contributions of heroic Baptist men and women.



Rev. Julie Whidden Long is the pastor of First Baptist Church of Christ in Macon, Georgia. She previously served as minister of children and families (2005–2013) and associate pastor (2013–2018) at FBCX Macon. Additionally, Rev. Long was the associate director of Baptist Women in Ministry (2018–2019) and launched a coaching and consulting practice in 2020. A native of Fitzgerald, Georgia, she is a two-time graduate of Mercer University, where she earned a Bachelor of Arts in Christianity and History from the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences in 2002 and a Master of Divinity from McAfee School of Theology in 2005. She is married to Jody Long, executive coordinator of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of Georgia, and they have two children.