

Woman pastor called to large SBC church: First Baptist of Decatur, Georgia

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The 2,700-member First Baptist Church of Decatur, Georgia, has become the largest church associated with the Southern Baptist Convention or the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship to hire a woman as senior pastor.

In a business session after Sunday morning worship June 17, nearly 400 members voted to call Julie Pennington-Russell as minister. The proposal, approved by a show of hands, went unchallenged in a discussion session.

Pennington-Russell, 46, is currently senior pastor of Calvary Baptist Church in Waco, Texas, a post she has held since 1998. She had previously worked as a pastor at Nineteenth Avenue Baptist Church in San Francisco. She will begin her new job August 19, succeeding Gary Parker, who resigned.

The Decatur church is one of several historic congregations in that city, which is now surrounded by metropolitan Atlanta. Though founded as a Southern Baptist church, it says on its Web site that 80 percent of its members direct their mission funds to the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and roughly 20 percent give to the SBC.

“The thought of coming alongside this remarkable congregation in this world-class city at this moment in history fills me with a huge joy,” Pennington-Russell said in a press statement. “Our family is eager to hoist our sail with this great community of Christ-followers.”

In a statement to the church about Pennington-Russell, search committee members said they considered 64 candidates for the position. The committee also consulted an outside panel of six people “knowledgeable in Baptist life today.”

Pennington-Russell will undoubtedly become a prominent figure in moderate Baptist life. The SBC’s doctrinal statement, the “Baptist Faith and Message,” states that “the

office of pastor is limited to men as qualified by scripture.” But a recent study by Baptist Women in Ministry identified female senior pastors in 117 congregations currently or previously affiliated with the SBC. More than 1,800 women have been ordained to serve in various ministry roles, the study reported.

Pennington-Russell graduated from the University of Central Florida in Orlando and Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary in Mill Valley, California. She is completing a doctor of ministry degree at Baylor University’s George W. Truett Theological Seminary. Pennington-Russell and her husband, Tim, have two children.

Al Mohler, president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and an opponent of women as pastors, agreed in an online statement that Pennington-Russell’s selection was precedent-setting and would elevate her as “one of the most prominent leaders among moderate and liberal Baptists.” Mohler also said the move heightens the distance between the SBC and the constellation of moderate Baptist organizations at odds with the parent denomination. *-Hannah Elliott, Associated Baptist Press*