

Single women pastors choose motherhood

by [Lauren Markoe](#) in the [September 3, 2014](#) issue

When St. Paul Baptist Church in Philadelphia hired Leslie Callahan as its first female pastor in 2009, she was nearing her 40th birthday and her biological clock was getting hard to ignore.

She delighted in her ministry but also wanted a husband and children in her life. Finding a husband she couldn't do much about—he just hadn't stepped into her life.

“But it was clear to me that I was going to do everything in my power to realize my dream of becoming a parent,” she said.

Now Callahan is mother to 22-month-old Bella, who was welcomed joyously by what the pastor describes as “a pretty traditional Baptist church.” She describes Bella's arrival as “a divine regrouping,” a different answer to her prayers than she had envisioned. “I definitely feel that God brought Bella and me into each other's lives.”

According to federal statistics, more than 40 percent of births are to unmarried mothers.

Even in houses of worship that have accepted women in the pulpit, an unwed mother can still unsettle the pews. Yet some female clergy are concluding that their congregations can handle their choice.

“These women are putting forward the possibility that not only can you have a vocation to ministry and a vocation to motherhood, but that marriage is not necessarily a part of that,” said Ann D. Braude, director of the Women's Studies in Religion Program at Harvard Divinity School.

For many congregants, having a pregnant single woman lead the congregation crosses a line that a single adoptive mother does not, Braude said.

Callahan chose adoption. After St. Paul's had taken the step of giving the pulpit to a single woman, she didn't want to ask the congregation to accept a pregnant single woman. “I didn't think it would be a fair thing to do.”

The women interviewed for this story had the financial means to support a family on their own. While most parents struggle to balance work and children, the feat is harder still for public figures whose work is to nurture a congregation.

Beverly Bartlett, associate pastor of Manhattan's Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church, had made a motherhood pact with herself when she was in her twenties. If she were still single in her mid-thirties, she would try to have children on her own.

She waited until her forties and learned that her chances to have a successful pregnancy were not good. But a toddler in Nepal needed a home. Emily, now ten, is the minister's daughter. "The church," said Bartlett, "is her extended family."

And what if Bartlett had become pregnant, instead of adopting?

"The church probably could have handled it, but not without some discussion, and there probably would have been some people who would not have looked upon it favorably," she said.

Bartlett has spoken with one other clergywoman who has embarked on parenthood without a partner, and she has heard of another.

Carolyn Gordon, who chairs the department of preaching and communication at Fuller Theological Seminary, said women preachers are still new in many congregations, and their presence is bound to bring change. The first wave of ordained women may not have considered unmarried motherhood an option, she said.

"But I would not be surprised to see more as time goes on," she said. "The women groomed for ministry are different now." —RNS