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June 23, 2023

# The Rev. Dr. Stephanie Rutt: And who shall lead?

# *“You were wild once here. Don’t let them tame you.”* — *Isadora Duncan (1877-1927)*

ISADORA DUNCAN used her bare feet to pioneer a new dance form — modern dance — paving the way for the likes of Martha Graham. Girls and women today, particularly those associated with the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) and distraught over recent changes in church policy, might well benefit from contemplating such a spirit; one courageous enough to defy the conventional norms of her day to make her mark.

And courage it will take as the SBC — the world’s largest Baptist organization, representing roughly 47,000 churches — has just moved to ban all churches with female pastors, making them, in my view, one of *the* most dangerous environments for our children, especially girls but also for women of all ages.

Citing biblical “authority,” the ramifications of this decision essentially mean that the male leaders have now taken it upon themselves to speak for God in all matters of church leadership. Females who may have heard the call to lead or may hear it in the future are warned not to trust such a heretical message. Instead, they should trust them, now representing the true “messengers” of the SBC as it is they alone who can discern the right path.

How tidy . . . and exploitative, enslaving, and purely misogynistic. The decision is aimed at keeping women locked into social roles strictly defined by their patriarchy.

And it’s already having a profoundly damaging effect on our teen girls of faith. Consider the June 15th CNN story, “Southern Baptist Convention votes to uphold removal of Saddleback Church over women pastors after appeal by Rick Warren.” Linda Barnes Popham, pastor for 30 years and ousted at Fern Creek Baptist in Louisville, Kentucky, recalls how a 14-year-old girl sought her out in the crowd and just “wept and wept” in her arms, telling her, “I’m 14 years old, and when I was 11, God called me to be a minister. And now I can’t do that in the family that I love.”

Spiritually banished from her calling, what does such a girl do or feel when she sees a boy her age called to ministry being lifted up and celebrated? What questions might ooze from this festering? “Why am I not enough?” And perhaps most heartbreaking, “Can I really trust the voice of God in my life?”

I have some personal authority to speak to this issue. I’ve been a minister since being ordained in 2005 and founded a church in 2011 — not just any church but one representing a new paradigm in ministry, an interfaith church.

I’ve often said, “I’m so glad I’m not in charge of my life as I could’ve never seen it evolving in this way.” Yet, every time I paused or questioned, I learned to trust the voice of God and followed one step at a time. Nothing would have been possible without that voice leading the way.

Graciously, I’ve been blessed to have the full support of my husband of 40 years. This is why I stand shoulder to shoulder, resolute, proud, tall and true, with all young girls and women called to church leadership and with all the men in their lives who rise up to support them.

As I think of the SBC leadership, I fear for the future. How long might it be before it’s decided that just as women should not lead men in the church, they rightly shouldn’t lead men in any context?

Contemplating this trajectory, I can surmise how truly frightened such men must be — terrified in fact — to contemplate being around strong, faith-filled women. Why else go to such means to silence and control them?

This ironically speaks to just how powerful they know the women in their lives are or could be given the chance. And they are right about that. We are powerful.

I say to all girls or women in the SBC who feel called to church leadership, follow in the spirit of an Isadora Duncan, or another woman who inspires you. Hold close and treasure the scriptures that have long whispered to your aching heart. Throw off your shoes, take to the path God has set before you and let your feet tell the story! Shout out your soul’s joy, free on the wind, far and wide!

Dance! Oh, lover of God! Shake off the judgements and decrees placed upon you. Dance long until you feel your untamed spirit return again — that Spirit made in the image of the Creator. Dance barefoot until you are again wild and free.

The Rev. Dr. Stephanie Rutt lives in Nashua.