

The Life and Times of A Spiritual Leader
A Case Prepared by Fr. Vernon Huguley

*“Then I heard the voice of the Lord say to me: Whom shall I send?
Here I am Lord, send me!”*
Isaiah 6:8

*“To whom ever I send you, you shall go. Whatever I command you, you shall speak!
Have no fear before them, because I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord.”*
Jeremiah 1:8

Who is she that has heard the voice of the Lord in her life to follow Him? She is a woman called by God to lead a group of people to God. She is a woman called to help others discern God’s movement in their lives and to help them to know and understand themselves. She is a woman who in spite of her denominational intolerance for women in the pulpit, continues to search deep within her heart for the lone voice that continues to call her deeper and deeper to a committed life of following Jesus. She is one, like Jeremiah the Prophet, who came from a family that is mission/servant oriented.

She is a Southern woman who has grown up in a time where prejudices are still rampant in her culture, people and church. She is a woman called by God who realizes that the lone call in her life is the call that would make her first among many women who were first in other professions traditionally held by men, and first among the few women who are called to preach, to proclaim, to stand up for justice and to lead others to Jesus Christ.

Who is she? She is Sarah Jackson Shelton, the youngest of four children born to Dr. J. Lamar Jackson, a Baptist preacher, and Hermione Dannelly Jackson, a Baptist mission worker, historian and writer. Sarah is her mother’s daughter whose written history of missionary women in the Baptist convention, bears the prophetic title “*Women*

of Vision". Mrs. Jackson could not have known that she was possibly speaking of a future that her own daughter would embrace. Dr. and Mrs. Jackson created a loving family. Mary Helen, Betty Lou, James Lamar and Sarah Jane attended church every Sunday. It was during that time that the Lord placed a call in her heart to follow Him. As she grew, she continued to discover God's will in her life and for her life. As a child she and her siblings enjoyed attending church services with their parents. Not only did the children attend services but they were active in all the church programming including Sunday school and singing in the choir.

The love of God was taught and witnessed not only in the Church but in her family. Their home provided a place of nurturance and learning. Home and family life became a crucial turning point in young Sarah's vocational discernment. It was a time that she sat and listened to stories of family life and church life. The Jackson children were privy to having their maternal grandmother and their paternal grandfather to live in their home. Sarah has fond memories of seeing her maternal grandmother sitting in her bedroom window reading her Bible. She recalls that her grandmother often left her Bible open to her favorite Scripture passages.

Family dinners in the Jackson home were times of good food, fellowship and fun. Meals were served promptly at six o'clock p.m. each night. Dinner would begin as usual with the blessing of the meal. Dr. and Mrs. Jackson encouraged the children to talk about their day as they ate. At some point during the meal, her father would often introduce a new word to the family or a quote to be researched and/or explained. Sarah recalls that her parents were very kind and generous. Family time was not a time to discuss or talk

negatively about individual church members. Her parents saw the best in people, especially church folks.

Home life was enjoyable for many reasons but especially because their home was open to those who might be separated from family for the holidays or visiting preachers and missionaries. Preachers and missionaries frequently stayed at the Jackson's home. Church life and ministry made up common household conversation. Many stories about mission work were shared by Baptist figures like Alma Hunt, Marie Mathis and Bernice Elliott, Baptist leaders in the Woman's Missionary Union. These experiences intensified Sarah's curiosity about her call to serve God in the church. With her mother's prophetic book, Women of Vision, little did Sarah know that her vision, her call was beginning to un-fold. She learned during that time the importance of ministry in one's life and the importance of being dedicated to ministry and the call of the Lord. Sarah was constantly being faced with the question, that the Prophet Isaiah asked, "Whom shall I send?"

Also, like Jeremiah, Sarah comes from a family of Ministers. Her maternal grandfather (Dr. Clarence M. Dannelly) served in the United Methodist Church as a National Lay Administrator. He was challenged on issues of justice, when in the fifties he stood up for the rights of a black layman to serve his denomination. His peers did not approve of him supporting a black man and demanded the grandfather's resignation as Superintendent of the Montgomery, Al. school system.

Her paternal grandfather (Rev. James Buchanan Jackson) was a Baptist preacher who fathered five children. Two of his sons became Baptist preachers. One of them was Sarah's father. Her father (Dr. J. Lamar Jackson) pastored Baptist churches, gave strong

denominational leadership, and was a trustee for several Baptist educational institutions during his life.

Her mother (Hermione Dannelly Jackson) had a desire to be a Methodist missionary, but she married a Baptist preacher instead. She volunteered her time with The Woman's Missionary Union. Her book, Women of Vision detailed the life of women missionaries. Today, Sarah's two sisters, Mary Helen Jackson Dixon and Betty Lou Jackson Land serve as deaconesses in their respective Baptist churches. It affirms the popular cliché: "The family that prays together stays together." The influence of a praying family and an open minded family to the will of God in their lives has produced great church workers.

Sarah holds a Bachelor's of Science from the University of Alabama (1977) and Master of Religious Education (1979) and a Masters of Divinity (1981) from the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. She was licensed to the ministry (March 31, 1982) and ordained (April 18, 1982) by Brookwood Baptist Church in Birmingham, Al. While she has served in a variety of ministry positions for twenty six years, Sarah has only held the position of Pastor at the Baptist Church of the Covenant, Birmingham, Al. She served the church as its Intentional Interim Pastor from December of 2000 to December of 2001. She was called to be Pastor of Baptist Church of the Covenant in September, 2002. She is one of only two female Baptist pastors in the state of Alabama. Because of her pioneer calling, she was featured in an article in Time magazine.

Not only did the Lord call her to ministry, but He called her to be married and have a family. She is also the wife of Lloyd Shelton, president of Lovoy, Summerville,

and Shelton, PC, an accounting firm in Birmingham. Sarah and Lloyd have been married for twenty years, and they are the proud parents of two boys, David, 18 and Dannelly, 13. She and her family live in Mountain Brook, a suburb of Birmingham.

Someone once said, in a vocational seminar, that every call to follow the Lord has a four part cycle: Call, Risk Taking, Crisis and Blessing. While we tend to remember the initial occurrence of these aspects, they are a continuous cycle of grace. The **Call** is the initial request to follow the Lord to ministry. It's a time of new discovery and excitement. **Risk Taking** is where one decides to test the waters. They begin to explore and experiment with the aspects of calling. **Crisis** is when the one who has been called encounters conflict and the called individual feels challenged. It's that time when we realize that all people do not support our call or wish to cooperate with the call. The **Blessing** occurs after one has gone through the risk and the crisis. The call is blessed in some significant way. The individual has come to the point of understanding that God called, they stepped out in faith, they persevered through the crisis, and in gratitude, can recognize the ways that God was there through it all. The one called surrenders and accepts that God has something in store for the individual. Everyone who has been called, and continues to live the call, experiences this cycle. Sarah has experienced this cycle at various stages in her life. She continues to encounter them today.

The Call: From birth the Lord has been present to Sarah. When reading the Scriptures, especially the Call Narratives, one can see when individual prophets and leaders were called, God was present in their lives from the very beginning. Sarah, because of the influence of her parents and grandparents, has always known of God and doing God's will. When God calls individuals to ministry, there is often times a struggle

that takes place. St. Augustine once said, “My soul is restless oh God, until it rest in you.” Anyone who has experienced that lone call from God has experienced restlessness. Sarah reflects on an experience when on a post high school graduation choir tour, she had some time to think about the choice she made in choosing a Major at the University of Alabama. She states, “So real was God’s presence, that I felt an uneasiness about the major I had declared. No matter what I did or how I prayed, the unrest would not go away. So I talked with the Lord about it. I prayed that I was willing to do anything, even commit my life to fulltime Christian ministry, if God would just take that uneasiness away. It went away immediately and has never returned.” Sarah’s experience and others who have struggled with a call to ministry show that until you surrender to the call, the struggle, you will not find rest.

When individuals feel a call to ministry in the church, there is often times struggle and continued unrest. Individuals who struggle, pray, research and talk to their Pastor’s, Spiritual Director’s or if they are in an Educational Institution would also speak to their Professors. The struggle and unrest continues because one wants to know if their call is real, and if the call is actually their true vocation to ministry. I believe anyone who is discerning a call to ministry experience this challenge of the call. In her quest to answer God’s call, Sarah attended Southern Baptist seminary in Louisville, Ky. Her intent was to study to become a Director of Church Kindergartens. She felt this was one of the ways that she could serve God in the church, because it was the one ministry in the church where she saw women participating.

While attending Southern, she so enjoyed her classes in Theology, that she began to entertain the thought that maybe God was calling her to a higher place to serve Him.

She thought that God was calling her to preach. She states, “I went to talk with my Professor, Dr. Findley Edge, and I told him that I thought that God was calling me to preach. He asked why this was a problem. I answered that I had never seen a woman do this. To which he immediately came nose to nose with me and said, “Wouldn’t you rather be a part of something new and exciting rather than a part of what has always been?” And everything inside of me said “yes!” This call to preach was confirmed in my last semester when I won the Francisco Preaching Award and was asked to preach in the Seminary’s chapel for worship. It was a golden time in which I received amazing encouragement.” On the journey of discernment, God will often send little signs or blessings to let us know that we are on the right track. This episode in her life was a moment of great joy because it affirmed what Sarah felt deep within, that God was calling her.

“Tell me, Lord, have I not served you for their good? Have I not interceded with you in the time of misfortune and anguish? Remember me, Lord, visit me and avenge my persecutors. Because of your long suffering banish me not; know that for you words, I devoured them; they became my joy and the happiness of heart. Because I bore your Name, O Lord, God of host.”

Jeremiah 15:11,15-16.

“Thus the Lord answered me: If you repent, so that I restore you, in my presence you shall stand; If you bring forth the precious without the vile, you shall be my mouthpiece. Then it shall be they who turn to you, and you shall not turn to them; And I will make you toward this people a solid wall of brass. Though they fight against you, they shall not prevail, For I am with you to deliver and rescue you, says the Lord. I will free you from the hand of the wicked, and rescue you from the grasp of the violent.”

Jeremiah 15:19-21

Risk Taking and Crisis: Just like any congregation and other denominations, being a Baptist has its rewards and difficulties. Sarah always knew that being a woman, and being called to be a woman Pastor, would always be a source of conflict. At times in her ministry, she knew that things would be difficult as well as be successful. Just as

Jeremiah felt that the Lord had turned His back on him, the Lord had to reassure Jeremiah, “That He was with Him like a Mighty Champion.” Sarah however, never felt that the Lord has deserted her. She knew that the One who called her would see her through the good and bad times of ministry.

The following cites a time when Sarah encountered the beginning of many ministerial crises in her ministry. After she had graduated from Southern Seminary, Sarah returned back to Birmingham to take a position as Youth Minister at Brookwood Baptist Church. She states, “The controversy in the Southern Baptist convention began at the time that I took the position as Youth Minister. It was the first time, I heard other voices telling me that I could not do what I felt God had called me to do. What no one seemed to understand, then or now, is that I have never been on a crusade for women. I am all about being faithful to what I know God has called and encourages me to do.”

She continues: “As the Southern Baptist Convention continued to become less open to women’s leadership, I took a position on The Coordinating Council of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, a moderate Baptist organization. Some church members disagreed with the decision. They made threats to ask for my resignation and put pressure on the pastor. The pastor, who already reminded me of “my place,” was in agreement with the contingency who opposed my serving on the Council. I resigned, after eleven years of ministry, under extremely difficult circumstances. While things appeared to be dark, I still knew that God’s presence was with me. I mainly wondered if God could work His good and perfect will through imperfect people!”

Another example from this time: “We had endured a Deacon’s meeting in which I was discussed as if I were not present in the room. When the meeting was over, I quickly

left the room and got in my car. I could not go far, because I lost my composure and was not able to drive. So, I drove to a part of the parking lot that was dark and obscure, turned off my car and wept. I could feel my spirit literally spiraling down into darkness, but just before I hit what I perceived to be the bottom, it was as if a hand reached out to my spirit, caught me, and held me. While those days were difficult, the presence of God was alive to comfort and keep me patient.”

After twenty years of being in the ministry, Sarah realized that she still did not have a pulpit from which to preach. She told the Lord: “ I’m going home. I quit! And quite truthfully, I told the Lord that if He wanted me to fulfill the calling that He had given, then He could get off His throne and make something happen! I was home for eighteen months, when Baptist Church of the Covenant called me to be their interim. The interviewing committee suggested that I not be their interim, so I could apply for their pastoral position later. I did not, however, want to miss out on an opportunity to have a pulpit...even if it was only for one year.”

The following is another example of the four part cycle of a vocation to follow Jesus:

THE CALL: Pastor Sarah served the Covenant as its interim Pastor. Her interim tenure lasted one year to the hour that she was due to leave. Pastor Sarah was the intentional interim Pastor of Baptist Church of the Covenant. Her primary role was to confront the church about their historical patterns of behavior. After she had finished her interim Pastorate, the church received another interim pastor since a Pastor had not been chosen. The church made a rule which stated, the interim could not be considered for the Pastorate. However, the church decided to lift the rule. They told Pastor Sarah that she

could apply, with the understanding that she would have to go through the normal application process.

THE RISK AND CRISIS: Pastor Sarah wasn't sure if she wanted to apply for the position. She waited until the last hour. Some of the members of the church realize that she had not applied and they called and asked her to submit her application. Two days from the deadline, she decided to apply. Her hesitation in applying was due to the fact that she did not want to create false hope for herself as well as the church. She did not want to run the risk of being rejected. A national search for a Pastor was being conducted. The Chair of the search committee told her the committee tried not to consider her because they wanted to be fair.

They invited Sarah and her husband Lloyd to a dinner at one of the committee member's homes to have dinner and a conversation. The dinner lasted for three hours and it was an informal interview. When Lloyd and Sarah returned to their car, Lloyd looked at her and said, "I am feeling called, let's go!" She looked at him and said, "But I don't!" She was feeling confusion within her spirit. The committee did not let on as if they wanted her, this deepened her confusion. A few weeks later she was invited to another interview, this time at another committee member's home. They had a few more questions for her. They told her, "We would like to invite you to be our Pastor, and we would like to present you to the congregation." Sarah told them that she was still struggling with the decision.

That same night, the chairman of the committee called her and said, "We want you to take some time to think and pray about this decision. Take a week. Don't call us and we won't call you." Sarah told her, "I am going to Evergreen to visit my dad. I will

take the time to think and pray.” Sarah told her father why she was coming to visit. She told him she needed some time to think and pray. Her father allowed her to do what she came to do. He did not question her and talk to her about her decision. She was with her father one full week. The last night before she was to return back to Birmingham she and her father was sitting on the porch, on a hot steamy summer night in July. The mosquitoes were not biting because her dad was smoking a cigar and the smoke from it kept the mosquitoes from biting. He rose up from his chair and looked at her and said, “Baby girl, when one or two Baptists can agree on anything, you are to pay attention. But when a committee is unanimous on their decision, you need to listen!”

THE BLESSING: “I came home. Lloyd and I talked about it. I called the chair person and told her that I was ready for the next step. Sarah knew the next step was to preach to the congregation. Since she had been there for about a year they had already heard her preach. So the next step was to be introduced to the community of faith. At one of their Wednesday fellowship and prayer meetings, she was escorted in and introduced to the community. They stood and gave her a standing ovation. After they finished clapping and were seated, she told them, “I have just finished an interim period with you. You know me and I know you. I know your strengths and your weaknesses. I need you to walk with me as we support one another. We can do this together!”

“In August, I was in Evergreen, Alabama again this time for our family reunion. The church had a business session at the end of the Worship Service. They voted by secret ballot. There were two no votes and all the rest were yes. The church moderator was so excited that he called the wrong cell number. He called Lloyd by mistake who was on the golf course. Others from the church called, but it was not official until the

moderator had extended the call. He eventually called me and extended the call of the church and I accepted. So I started the Tuesday after Labor Day. A couple was volunteering to do missionary work in Africa and was denied appointment by the International Mission Board because they had a female Pastor. We had rocks thrown into the windows of the church. There was and still is tension within the Birmingham Baptist Association (BBA), and the Alabama Baptist State Convention. I have been called before the membership Committee of the BBA, in order to answer questions in regards to our open membership policy in the church. When I chose to tell the congregation one Sunday morning, I did something I don't ever do, I wept in the pulpit. This was the Association that had raised and nurtured me; my father had given his life to it; every church in which I served, but one, was a part of this Association. They were my family, and they were threatening to disown me. I told the congregation about the confrontation with the Association and I cried. I finally issued the invitation to respond to the Gospel, and to my surprise, one by one they left their seats. They came to the front. Some touched me, others hugged me, they encouraged me to be strong, and they thanked me and told me they loved me, and thanks for standing up for us. They were giving me their blessing.”

So, an amazing joining of journeys began. It was the most unlikely place to find this Mountain Brook girl whose experience was all in neighborhood churches. “Now, I find myself in a downtown church with an eclectic group of folks....and amazingly it felt like coming home. God’s faithfulness to me at Covenant has been remarkable. More than ever, I am aware of God’s presence that leads and directs, grants wisdom and inspiration, brings comfort and provides energy.” This experience in Sarah’s life is the

part of the call that she receives God's blessings. It was a great sigh of relief, that the challenges she had encountered prove to be worth it. God had brought her through another difficult journey. In being faithful to the call, we learn that we have to go through it to get to it. Sometimes we have to endure the difficulties of life in order to learn something about ourselves, God's presence and strength in our lives, and something about God.

"No ear has ever heard, no eye has ever seen, any God but you doing such deeds for those who wait for Him."

Isaiah 64:4

This is one of Sarah's favorite Scripture passages. It expresses her sentiments that the one who has been called has to wait on the Lord. We have to wait on the Lord to do what it is that He has in store for the individual. God allows each person to experience many things in life, especially those who are called to follow Him. The experience helps us to come to know ourselves and the God we serve. A big part of serving the Lord is prayer and waiting on God to act or to answer our prayer. This Scripture reflects part of the things that God has allowed Sarah to experience and go through. For over twenty years she served the Lord waiting and anticipating that moment when God would answer her prayer. Sarah knew in her heart that God would come through. But the challenge for her was when.

**CALLED TO BE GOD'S PEOPLE:
BAPTIST CHURCH OF THE COVENANT**

Baptist Church of the Covenant is a diverse family of people who share a vibrant Christian faith, who worship God reverently, and who provide the city of Birmingham with a winsome witness of God's love that is both spoken and incarnated in ministries of

compassion. (Moye, pp. 97-99) The Baptist Church of the Covenant is a church that exists and ministers on the cutting edge of church life. To understand this statement we have to go back to the beginnings of the church, which originated in the First Baptist Church of Birmingham.

First Baptist Church of Birmingham was organized and founded on June 21, 1872, by the late Reverend John L. D. Hillyer, who was assisted by Reverend D. W. Gwin. There were eight charter members. The members were given a lot by Elyton Land Company at the corner of Sixth Avenue and Twenty-Second Street. The church membership included many of the children, grandchildren and great grandchildren of the founding members (Moss, P.167). The church soon developed regional prominence as a church whose pulpit drew scholarly, prestigious leaders that took pride in its central location and the array of services it provided to the local community. The growth of the church paralleled the growth of the city, and by the 1950's, First Baptist Church had become an all white institution located amidst the growing black population of the Central City neighborhood (McCullough, p22).

The church had its struggles with pastors and people. First Baptist Church had the reputation of being a "meat grinder" for pastors and staff - chewing them up and spitting them out after only a few years (Bass, p. 73). During the turbulent times of the Civil Rights Movement, First Baptist Church encountered what Vernon Huguley considers to be a test of their Christianity. In June of 1954, church members voted to admit blacks into worship services on a segregated basis; that is, the deacons were to "seat any colored visitors at a designated place in the balcony." Four years later, location and circumstances again compelled First Baptist to determine whether blacks would be

seated in worship services. After much heated debate, the deacons voted in 1959 not only to seat blacks, but to seat them wherever there was an available seat (McCullough, p23). On December 26, 1961, the church called Reverend James Earl Stallings to be its Pastor. Under his leadership, Reverend Stallings instituted a ministry of trying to learn the names of each member in the church by home visitations, a Civil Rights demonstration in 1963 and a revival that was believed to have a great spiritual effect on the city of Birmingham (Lawson & Strong, p. 25)

Reverend Stallings described the experiences of the Civil Rights as one of the “greatest dilemmas” of his life in Birmingham. The drama of the Civil Rights demonstrations in Birmingham touched the life and ministry of Earl Stallings more directly than any of the white clergymen addressed in Martin Luther King’s letter from The Birmingham Jail. As part of the plan of the SCLC to highlight the hypocrisy of segregation, First Baptist Church was targeted to receive black visitors (Bass, pp70-71). They would begin on Easter Sunday morning, April 14, 1963, and continue several weeks thereafter. Having blacks to visit white churches violated the social custom at that time. The visitors received the reaction that Dr. King and the SCLC had hope for bringing tensions to the surface in a white church and attracting the attention of the national press. These unique visitors inflamed radical segregationist not only in Stallings church but other churches in the Birmingham area as well. These visits brought tremendous pressure and threats upon the Pastors (Bass, p 71).

First Baptist Church was a ministry that Stallings felt called to, and one that his family background had prepared him for. He stated that “The Great Depression taught me the true values of life. It ultimately came down to the fact that I had to make a stand

in Birmingham, because of the values that I learned in my early life. Those ideals included honesty, personal integrity, a willingness to assume responsibility, and respect for the dignity of all humankind, regardless of race.” (Bass, pp72-73)

That Easter Sunday, Reverend Stallings had little time to react to the prospect of black visitors attending his service. Less than an hour prior to the start of the 10:55 a.m. service, Reverend Stallings received word from a reporter that his visitors would soon be arriving. Soon afterwards, civil rights activist Andrew Young and two college age black women entered the crowded sanctuary. Ushers handed them cards and seated them four or five rows from the back of the church (Bass, p. 76). Almost immediately nearly seventy white worshippers left the church in protest. Reverend Stallings later commented that the segregationist action did not represent the way most of the membership felt about welcoming the blacks to the worship service. Two more black women arrived a few minutes after the start of the service and sat with the other activists (Bass, p 77).

Following the service, church members gathered in the streets alongside several reporters and photographers to observe the church’s visitors. SCLC leaders and the news media anticipated a direct confrontation with segregationist elements at First Baptist. However, as the visitors exited the sanctuary, Stallings greeted Young and his group on the steps of the church with a heartfelt smile and a warm handshake. Young handed Stallings a form letter stating the demonstrators’ motives. Their purpose for coming to First Baptist on the day of Resurrection was to seek a new life together with their separated brothers and sisters. Some people called this act a “kneel in,” but the Civil Rights activists simply hoped to worship in a house of prayer for all people (Bass, p 77).

Since 1954, First Baptist Church maintained an open door policy for any black

visitor. Pastor J. T. Ford had initiated the policy following the Brown decision and each succeeding pastor to Stallings reaffirmed the policy. The week before Easter Sunday, 1963, the board of deacons had done the same. However, the issue remained a moot point as long as blacks never appeared at a church service (Bass, p77). The controversy over the black visitors in the Spring of 1963 was just the opening engagement in a drawn out conflict for the heart and soul of the First Baptist Church of Birmingham (Bass, p 80).

In 1968, a special planning committee presented to the congregation the *Commitments*. This was a document defining the role of the church in its downtown environment and outlining a specific plan for the development of both the church building and its outreach programs. Perhaps the most significant *Commitment* was the ninth, which read, “We are maintaining here a small part of God’s great democracy, and ask courtesy and tolerance for all alike. On these terms, we invite all who will, whether they are young or old, proud or plain, rich or poor to partake with us of the love of God, and to give themselves to the task that is before us.” It was because of the inclusiveness of the *Commitments* – which had been unanimously adopted – and the attendance of blacks at the Easter services of 1963 that Dr. J Herbert Gilmore became the next Pastor of First Baptist Church (McCullough, p 23).

Since the church was located on the edge of the central business district, with a large low-income housing development across the street, this commitment by the congregation was an enormous challenge to Dr. Gilmore. Church ministry is an enormous challenge for the pastor and the laity because often times the church has good intentions of doing the mission and will of God, but it appears to be only lip service instead of words put into action. Good church ministry breaks down if the church (pastor

and laity) is not willing to come out of their comfort zones and allow the Word of God to grow and become fertile in their lives. First Baptist's intentions to evangelize their environment were good until their efforts took root in the lives of the people they set out to convert. The message went out and was caught, and the participants were willing to transform their lives for the sake of Christ.

Pastor Gilmore encouraged the community of First Baptist to continue its social ministries and as a result, several black families began attending church services. Again, this action caused more white families to leave the church. In April 1970, the deacons convened a special meeting so that the opposition, that is, the "unholy alliance," formed between the segregationist and fundamentalists might formally disparage the church's programs and formally accuse Gilmore of being Biblically unsound. The first group opposed the presence of blacks in the congregation, and the latter disapproved of the "liberal" nature of social ministries that Gilmore and the young church staff had implemented. Gilmore described how the power of opposition increased as "a vicious collusion began to grow between the segregationist and fundamentalist, who used each other to accomplish their common purpose which was the removal of the pastor (McCullough, p. 24)."

The racial problems of First Baptist Church of Birmingham continued until the summer of 1970, when the opposition seized upon the chance to accomplish its goal. A Sunday in 1970, two African Americans, Winifred Bryant and her eleven-year-old daughter, Twila walked down the aisle of the First Baptist Church of Birmingham to become a member of the church that had been ministering to them. Twila Bryant was one of the first children to benefit from a tutoring program started by Pastor Gilmore

(Gilmore). There is a cliché that says, “One monkey don’t stop a show.” Well in the case of First Baptist Birmingham, the monkey did stop the show!

Winifred Bryant and her daughter Twila came before the congregation with four white candidates for membership. As per standard First Baptist procedure, a majority of the church members voted to receive every candidate. One elderly deacon objected verbally to the admittance of the two Negroes. The matter was referred back to the deacons, as dictated by church by-laws, so that they might discuss the objection and vote on the candidates among themselves. After a surprising unanimous vote to recommend all six candidates to the deacons, Pastor Gilmore suggested that a Wednesday night conference be held for open church discussion on the matter (McCullough, p 25).

In late July, Pastor Gilmore left to attend the meeting of the Baptist World Alliance, which was held in Tokyo. The opposition made a motion at one of its regular quarter church conferences to declare vacant the pulpit and the position of the youth director. One of its members, Judge Hobart Grooms, a member of the church since 1927, chairman of the board of Deacons, Sunday School Teacher, a respected member of the church, and a Federal Judge (but often times not respected for his pro-civil rights stance), spoke at the meeting to encourage those who were present to wait for the voting until the pastor returned from Tokyo so that he could have the opportunity to defend himself. The motion to delay carried by only two votes. The proposal for dismissal had been expanded to include the entire staff. Meanwhile, the debate over the question of admitting blacks to First Baptist membership continued to rage. Judge Grooms, who had been on the committee for the revision of the churches by-laws, acted as the parliamentarian. He played a key role in ensuring that proper procedure was followed in the making and

amending of motions, a complicated process through which circumvention of the rules would have allowed the segregationist to achieve an easy victory (McCullough, p 25).

On August 19, the opposition charged Pastor Gilmore with being theologically liberal, “scripturally unsound...and responsible for much of the disunity and disharmony” within the church. In a meeting that lasted eight hours, the divided church voted at 2:30 in the morning to retain its staff by a four-vote margin. On September 2, at a Wednesday night meeting, Judge Grooms spoke to the church about his beliefs on the Biblical treatment of integration and the consequences of their actions. Judge Grooms said to the gathered assembly, “I have reached the conclusion that we can’t work this matter out in our own strength. We are going to have to depend on God....” (McCullough, p.27). He cited twenty Scriptural references concerning the inclusive nature of the witness of Christ and His disciples. He then quoted Matthew’s Gospel to demonstrate the blatant hypocrisy in the church’s policy of sending missionaries to countries populated primarily by black people, but excluding blacks in the immediate neighborhood from church membership. You lock the doors of the Kingdom of heaven in men’s faces, yet you sail the seas and cross whole countries to win one convert..... In the 28th chapter of Matthew, verse 19 the word ‘nations’ there is translated in three different ways. It refers to people and it refers to races. ‘Go ye therefore and teach all’ people, all races, ‘all nations.’ So we have our marching orders as Christians to do these things, and I hope that we will keep this in mind (McCullough, p. 27).

The next issue he addressed was the issue of unity in the church. Judge Grooms was affected by the conflict of the racial issue. He told them that the issue of race would always be with them. It will stay with them until they decide the way the Lord wants

them to decide. He said, "I believe what we have undertaken here is what God would want us to do." He predicted that the negative vote on the membership question would harm the church, leading to dissolution, schism, or departure from its downtown location. Such a vote would negate the effects of First Baptist ministries both locally and abroad (McCullough, pp. 27-28).

On September 6, a local surgeon, Dr. Bryan Williamson called to order a meeting of individuals concerned with the extremism of the segregationist element in First Baptist – including Judge Grooms, Mrs. Grooms, and Hobart Grooms, Jr. They called themselves the "Company of the Committed." The group consisted of churchgoers who correctly believed that a large portion of the members of First Baptist neither understood nor accepted the 1968 *Commitments*. Dr. Williamson suggested several courses of action by which the Company could proceed and concluded with the statement, "We can start a new Church. This would be an open church which would carry on the ministries of the present church and also new ministries (McCullough, p. 28)."

The final showdown between the segregationists and the integrationists within the church occurred on September 27, 1970, when the long awaited vote on whether to extend membership to blacks took place. Again, a majority of the congregation voted to accept Mrs. Bryant and her daughter, but without the two-thirds majority vote required membership was denied. In moral protest, Pastor Gilmore read his resignation and Dr. Williamson stood and invited all of those who disapproved of the church's action to assemble immediately in another room for prayer. Approximately 250 people left the sanctuary on September 27, among them the seven members of the Groom's family, who regularly attended First Baptist (McCullough, p.30-31).

A complete split took place on Sunday, November 1, when the Company of the Committed met in the chapel of the Birmingham Baptist Association building. There were 375 people present at the first worship service, a number which Judge Grooms called “a real sign of hope.” The Grooms’ family was instrumental in the formation of the new church. The judge was responsible for collecting statements from individuals who wished to move their membership from First Baptist to the new church. The group voted to hire ten new staff members. In a decisive and motivational thrust, Judge Grooms moved the group immediately to “draw up papers of incorporation,” prepare a Sunday dedication service, and nominate church trustees. In addition, he moved for the commencement of Wednesday night services, choir rehearsals, regular Sunday worship services, and the formation of a WMU. Along with twenty-two others, the Judge and his sons were elected trustees on November 8, after the Judge had read the charter for the new church. Members selected the name “Baptist Church of the Covenant” which shortly thereafter, they call Dr. Gilmore to be their first pastor (McCullough, p. 31.)

The Birmingham News called the church, “the first Protestant church totally open on a racial basis in Alabama in modern times.” The dedication service occurred on December 20, 1970, and in February 1971, the church began meeting at Temple Emanuel. It would be almost three years until the Baptist Church of the Covenant would find a permanent downtown home, but during that time, the church remained committed to the downtown area, witnessing to and working with low income families (McCullough, pp 31-32).

The new church found its new home in an insurance building, located at 2117 University Boulevard. The building was soon converted into a holy place that they could

call home. The church and building are open to all and anyone who wishes to become a part of the open membership church. When the Church was constituted, it developed its identity around statements of its beliefs that still lead the congregation today in making decisions. These statements are called: “The Personal and Corporate Commitments.” It continues to hold to its historical Baptist roots. It finds much of its identity in Baptist distinctives like the Priesthood of all Believers, Biblical Freedom, Soul Competency, Local Church Autonomy, Voluntary Association, and Religious Freedom.

Baptist Church of the Covenant thinks differently than most Baptist churches. It is a Baptist church that is progressive in thought and action. It ordains women as Deacons and Ministers. Their membership is open to all people: all races, all socio-economic groups, homosexuals and lesbians. They are the first Baptist church in the state of Alabama to call a female to be their full time pastor. They are a church on the cutting edge, which often times puts them in the local and national news. The church appeared in LIFE magazine in its early days and more recently appeared in TIME magazine for the calling of its current pastor.

Unlike Covenant, First Baptist Church of Birmingham moved their new church to Homewood, Alabama (a suburb of Birmingham). It continues to be predominantly white and, at the time of this writing, has a white South African as its Pastor. First Baptist Church does not seem to have a mission mentality to evangelize its local community, or have converted to a community that is open to all people and races.

Baptist Church of the Covenant has a membership of 416 families. Their membership is based on the ideology, theology and worship of the church. Seventy five percent of its membership lives in and around the Greater Birmingham area, while the

other twenty five percent live outside of the state, but they choose to keep their membership at Covenant by sending in a contribution and/or making an annual visit. Unlike the location of the church which is a low-income area, the membership is comprised of professional people (counselors, lawyers, educators, social workers, etc.), middle management, students, and also illiterate people from off the streets. There is a large contingency of seminary educated people in the congregation.

Members of Covenant contribute a certain percentage of their offerings to other Baptist organizations in which they belong, and they also take up offerings for mission organizations. Members may choose to give their offerings to the Alabama Baptist State Convention, the Cooperative Program of the Southern Baptist Convention, the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, the Alliance of Baptist, or any combination of these.

Baptist Church of the Covenant believes in ‘putting their money where their mouth is.’ They believe in good worship, which places a high priority on good music. They have had a pipe organ from its inception, even when they met in the office basement for over 20 years. Covenant also has a high priority in helping and serving the mission areas such as Africa, Cuba, Argentina, and closer to home, Hurricane relief on the Gulf Coast.

The church has been served by five Pastors including its current one. Their first Pastor, Dr. Herbert Gilmore, was dignified, scholarly, and determined. He became the voice of God’s message to stand against injustice. Dr. John Whatley, its second Pastor, began to experiment with different worship styles but affirmed a high church style with the dedication of a five-rank pipe organ. For two decades they were a storefront church with a pipe organ (Moye, p3).

Their third Pastor, Dr. Dan Ivins, was energetic, impatient, and passionate. Whether white water rafting, cheering for the Tennessee Volunteers or preaching, he brought vitality to the church. When he saw problems in the city, country, church or the Southern Baptist Convention, he called the church to see them, to open their doors and hearts, and to act on those who were excluded. He challenged Covenant in its young adulthood to remain relevant (Moye, pp 3-4).

Their fourth Pastor, Dr. Roger Lovette, served seven years and had one of the longest tenures of all the Pastors. The church continued to mature, explore what it means to be church in downtown Birmingham at the time. He prodded them through a building fund as the church recommitted itself to be a Southside church in Birmingham. He led them to commit themselves to their spiritual roots, openness to embracing new people, new needs and new future dreams. The church also tore down those barriers that excluded women from leadership in the church. In 1974, women were ordained as deacons for the first time. From 1978 to the present, twelve women have been ordained at Covenant (Moye, p 4). Even though Covenant split from First Baptist Church, it seems to keep one of the elements of the old church, the element of being a “meat grinder” chewing up pastors and staff and spitting them out. All of the former Pastors who have all been activist, have also left under duress.

Their current Pastor, Reverend Sarah Jackson Shelton is leading the church into the 21st century as their first female pastor. She hopes to continue to build the church campus by adding ministry and educational space along with a columbarium for those who wish to have their remains cremated. The church is pleased to have their first woman Pastor and looks forward to great things under her leadership.

WHEREVER HE LEADS I GO... THE QUALITIES OF A PASTORAL LEADER

When one discerns a call to ministry, one has to know his/her skills, gifts, talents, strengths and weaknesses. These are very important in discovering where best to use what God has given to facilitate and work the call. In discerning our gifts, we must also remember that our gifts are also our crosses and serious realities. The discernment process should start early in one's life. Sarah discovered early in life that she first loved God and the people of God. One gift that Sarah observed from her father is that of having a sense of morality and integrity. Sarah strives to be a person with a sound moral background and principle. In her daily life, these qualities are articulated.

Another gift that Sarah possesses is that of being very compassionate. One may say that this gift is part of being a woman, but for her as a Pastor it helps her to be able to be present to her people, not only the women but also the men whom she ministers to and with. Her gift of compassion helps her to be able to walk with her people, especially when they are walking through the shadow of death.

The ability of trying to be present to all people is another one of her gifts that stretches her as a Pastor. Some Pastors are selective about who they will spend time. She makes an effort to be there for everybody. You may say this is impossible, but she tries and oftentimes succeeds. Another special thing that she does as a Pastor is to try to send a personal postcard every eighteen months to her church members to encourage them. To be able to do this and do it successfully means that she has to be very organized. This gift requires a lot of time. As she gives of her time, she realizes that being intentional and personal that it is taking time away from studies and family. She is

also a nurturer and when needed has the skills to be a problem solver. Some of these gifts and talents come naturally, but others come by being on the job. Sarah is a woman of high energy and great enthusiasm.

In addition to these professional gifts and talents, Sarah enjoys Music. When she was younger, she enjoyed playing the piano and an instrument in the band. Music is a part of what she does. Whenever she is working, be it work, at home or working on a sermon, she listens to Music. She particularly enjoys listening to Classical Music, Jazz, and Christmas Music. She can listen to Christmas Music at any time of the year. Music helps her to relax and it motivates her. She enjoys reading, traveling, needlework, and cooking.

Sarah enjoys giving of her time and talents by writing in Professional journals and giving talks at different conferences and churches. She has a great love for preaching. Her preaching style is one of teaching and inspiring people through storytelling. During the summer of 2007, she will take a pastoral sabbatical where she will meet with different authors and preachers to learn and discuss with them storytelling and effective preaching. In addition to her storytelling preaching style, she loves to write scriptural reflections and stories for different devotionals. Sarah is always motivated to learn and listen to the stories of people's lives.

When I interviewed members of her church and staff, Sarah received many complements on her leadership style. Her people are very appreciative of her leadership and the fact that she is their female Pastor. As some of the church members shared their thoughts and view of her leadership, they cited **various qualities of her leadership**.

One of her women Deacons spoke of her ability to be relentless:

*“I think **remaining true to the purpose** is the sign of a good leader. I am thinking specifically of how this church rallied around Sarah when some of her fellow pastors were criticizing her, and yet she did not show revenge toward them, she would invite them to come and talk and communicate. She had several leave in tears. They had come in rather arrogantly, but she remained true to her purpose of showing Christ’s love, and that is hard to do when you are being attacked.*”

Her staff members made the following comments:

*“Sarah likes to **get things done**. I think she is clear about what she wants each of us individually to do. She is very clear about what she wants each of us to take care of. I actually have found her to be more directive than other pastors I have worked with in terms of saying, “would you do this, would you do that.” She delegates a lot. She has an “A” personality type. She is much into planning and getting things done. Well in advance.”*

*“She is very much **a people person**. She is pretty good at getting other people’s stories and knowing what is going on with them. She seems to be pretty in tune to the personal stuff of a large number of church members. Not only does she focus on the church members, but her staff as well. She really takes an interest in us.”*

“She is demanding, but she doesn’t expect anymore of us as she expects of herself. She puts it in a way that you want to do the things she asks of you.”

I asked the staff what did they see as her **greatest quality**, when they think of her as a leader, child of God, mother? They all believed that her ability to love unconditionally was her greatest quality. One staff member made the following comment:

*“You asked about different aspects. About her being a wife, I do not know. However, about being a mother, she comes in early in the morning, and she puts in plenty of hours, but also leaves mid-afternoon to be with her kids, working hard to balance family life with full-time work. She does exhibit **lots of love for her family**. I do not think there is any way they could say they are neglected. I grew up in a pastor’s family, and didn’t see that kind of attention to family that she gives from a full-time pastor.”*

I asked some members at large about some qualities of Sarah’s leadership. They all had different responses to her leadership.

*“The church has kind of gotten a **direction**. The church is kind of going in one direction and she has jumped in, three years ago. She has jumped in and has helped provide leadership for the church kind of in the direction we are going in, which is, I guess more of the good stuff we are trying to do. And so she’s been a good guide and leader in helping with some well placed comments or directions that I don’t get the feeling that the church is going in the direction that Sarah*

wants it to go so much as Sarah's helping the church go in the direction that the church has chosen to go in."

*"One thing that, to go back to your earlier points there about what is this church's mission and to tie into Sarah Shelton, in many ways one of our functions, not our sole function but one of our functions is that we are a place, a church, where people who have been rejected, ostracized from other places are welcome. We are a sanctuary in a sense for people in that category. Others won't provide that. People are attracted to this church because they see us doing that. I see Sarah leading us on the way. The same thing you were talking about earlier, about her guiding us along the lines of what this church sees as its function. Her welcoming, **loving ways**, she sets the example for us to accept everyone as well as to accept people in the church and have a much bigger feeling among ourselves."*

I asked the group to sum up one thing that makes her a **good pastoral leader**. Some of her members commented that she had a strong sense of being called to do what she Do and loves it.

*"I would say **a sense of calling**. We are all called. I realize that but as much as anybody I know, her sense of calling to be a pastor goes back many, many years and is unequivocal. I think that makes her unique. Even when this church was born through the committee processes, pastor search committee, I do not think that committee recommended Sarah because she was a woman. I think the committee, looking at everybody in the church at this particular time felt like she possessed the qualities of leadership this church needed at this particular time. I would have to echo what one of the other members said earlier. Next time it may be a man. It just depends on what the group is that you identify at the last minute. If you got three candidates, forget that they're black or male or female. What do we need right now? A part of that came because this church voted to go into an intentional interim period of not less than six but not more than twelve months in order to deal with some issues in the church. We dealt with it before we called permanent leadership. As a result of that the committee apparently felt that this woman had those leadership qualities but I would say the uniqueness about her being a good leader, in particular a pastor, is her sense of calling."*

*"Sarah **leads from deep pain and rejection** so she is not doing anything other than what she would want to be done to her. She has had enough pain to pile up from the church that you would not expect her to still be willing to fulfill the call. Like I said, there is a tremendous amount of personal sacrifice. It was a big risk for her to be that intentional. That was a big risk but it was safe to accept the call and to come here, knowing her as long as I have known her, all the stories, and the episodes. I think when you lead from pain that is authentic and for her, she is sanctuary for us. We are that to her but there's a real sacredness in that. I think I feel like I want to care for her as much as she wants to care for me in my pain. That gets to a high level of trust that makes this a really empowering place. She's going to work really hard to try to speak the word and make it stimulating and*

truthful and then allow the Holy Spirit to convict or being Sarah at the same time so that they think she was preaching just to them. That is the Spirit but she's very spiritual. She's in tune with the Spirit and so that is what happens and she trusts the church to say, "This is what we're going to do with it now." That is a high level. That's what distinguish her is the level of trust that she has for the congregation, which is why I think she doesn't feel like she has to control the process. She doesn't have to make sure everybody knows where she stands and get the word out that I really want this to happen. She probably has an elaborate vision for the church but she values and trusts the church as a body to develop the vision and to carry it out. She isn't in control of that but she's fine not being in control of that."

To sum it up, Sarah possesses certain leadership skills that are unique to her. That uniqueness has to do with her being a woman, wife, mother, and most of all a child of God. A good Pastoral Leader should have a good sense of his/her call. They must know that God has called them and has a purpose for their life. They must enjoy being with people, be a people person, have genuine unconditional love for family, friends and others whom God puts in their lives. Being a pastor is a challenge but a rewarding vocation. The call, people and time make it a challenge. A good spiritual vision and dedication to the vision and cause helps to make it rewarding. No person in this life is exempt from pain and suffering. As mentioned by one of Sarah's church members, Sarah ministers from her pain of rejection. This quality makes her stand out as a pastoral leader, especially at Baptist Church of the Covenant.

Sarah is a first time pastor. She is a female pastor in a denomination that does not support or encourage female pastors. I asked members of her staff and church to share their thoughts of the **differences between male pastoral leadership and a female pastoral leadership**. A staff member shared the following:

"Her preaching seems to deal more with stuff that is felt often. Some male pastors will just be logical and say, "here's what we need to do". She deals with a lot of emotion, telling family stories, periodically you will hear her cry while preaching,

which I have never heard a male pastor do. She gets people to cry who are listening to her preach, more often than with the male pastor's that I have heard.

The following are comments from church members at large:

"I was not a part of the church when it had a male pastor but I have noticed some things and I've heard people talk and one of the things I've noticed is there's a paradigm shift. I think people relate differently to a woman. They treat their mommas different than they treat their daddies. People talk about it differently, talk about leadership and talk about the pastorate at this church differently because of Sarah's gender. I think it's also caused people to think about church differently, or think about this church and talk about this church differently because it's a paradigm shift in the leadership here, I think. It appears, just from what I heard or what I've experienced it appears to be a much healthier church. Yeah, because the church is letting momma lead."

"As far as having a female pastor, compared to a male, to me she has more of a motherly instinct. You can go to your male pastor and sit and talk about things, about problems that are bothering you, but it seems like she can understand more of your problems than he would, she would be more compassionate toward your problems, as far as he would not. I went to male pastors in the past and we've talked about problems and he didn't really seem like he was concerned about it. I talked to Pastor Sarah about things. For instance, before I got married, I got married here at Baptist Church of the Covenant, we talked about what I was concerned about and I felt like she understood a lot more than pastors in the past."

As you can see some of the members in the church feel that the difference between male pastors and female pastors are that female pastors seems to listen more, are more relational, motherly and compassionate. These skills come naturally to females, but they are not limited to females. There are male pastors who also exhibit some of these qualities.

Our God has created us to be people who are complete but not complete. When we come into the world, we come as creatures who are good. As we grow, we pick up not so good traits. Pastors are people too, people oftentimes forget. Because of their call people expect them to sometimes be "holier than thou". That is, "if you are a minister,

then you are expected to be without sin. However, when God created us God knew that we would have faults. But God expects us to work on our imperfections and become better. Every Pastor that's called is gifted for the ministry. However, with the gift comes serious realities, some failures, and some things that we do that are not so good. I asked Sarah's membership what were some of her **serious realities, challenges, or areas in her ministry that she needed to improve**. The following are their comments. The following are comments from the staff:

"Sometimes I think she is too much into the details. She wants everything planned down to the T, and while I think that is a good quality, sometimes I think it bogs her down."

"She puts too much pressure on herself."

I asked them why they felt she was under so much pressure. Is it because she is a first time pastor, or is it part of being a woman, or what is it? Again a number of them commented on her strong sense of call, her ability to organize.

*"I worry that she may **burn-out** and that it will be overwhelming and that she won't be able to make the choice that I am going to be a minister or I am going to be a writer because she is called on to do so many things and she does so many things so very well. I think everybody knows at some point you have to choose, and I hope her plate doesn't get so full that she has a total burn-out."*

*"I think a weakness or however you had it, is probably the same, whether it's male or female of a pastorate, the overwhelming **sense of responsibility** and the call to that causes them to many times abuse their families by not being there. I know even before Sarah became our pastor and I had recommended her to another church, I tried to say to her, "It's not your responsibility to make business decisions and make the church grow and all that kind of stuff." That is our decision. But the sense of call sometimes interferes with leadership and causes you to violate that and hence I think one of the things she's doing is trying to do too much. I don't know what you can do about that other than nothing. Thanks to the staff committee and the personnel policy that mandates sabbaticals and some other things that we probably are overcoming that. And that's not meant as criticism of her I just think it's such an overwhelming job. Let me go back and say one other thing. When we talk about a sense of calling, calling to be what? Pastor. I think it was Mahatma Gandhi one time says, "I must get up and go. There go the people and I am their leader." That goes back to what Morgan said a few moments ago. The pastors that this church has had, I use to think that*

our choir directors made our choir look good but I've about come to the conclusion the choir makes our choir directors look good. So I don't know which way you'd go but it's been such that this church, body wise, leads. I see Sarah being committed to being the pastor of this fellowship, not directing it but trying to keep it on the right track. But that sense of calling goes back to not have her own agenda, the agenda of this people and help to lead them and guide them and I think that is reflective of a strong laity and her ability to adapt to that where she can help mold and shape and pull rather than push."

The following comment is from a member of the church who is a person of color.

The comment expresses a view of a need for Sarah and the staff to have some type of diversity training in order for her and the staff to be more effective in the area of multi-cultural ministry.

*"There are also some suggestions that I've given Pastor Sarah that she's followed through on them. But I guess as a member of color, I always wondered, I think that there's more time I see in government agencies that spend more time with us sending us through **diversity training**. And I think that that's something as you talk to a number of people that's here on staff that they've never been through, BCOC might be the first church they've had as far as diversity and stuff like that. One thing that I find sometimes hard to get along with, that they are people that may have a slight understanding of my ethnicity but I think they need to go through diversity training. It would help them to understand where we've been, where we're going, it just helps. I don't know why the church is always the last to follow behind some governmental things. But I, just to instruct by that we hire people here, this church. One question I've asked is "Have you been in other congregations that's been a mixed congregation?" I think that what you have to understand is that there is a different socialization that comes with our ethnicity. I don't want to be an experiment. I don't mind to a certain point, but I think that if there is some type of training where you could have that can teach you more about how you deal with diversity. I think that whole staff needs to do that instead of kind of feeling their way about that. Matter of fact, just this group, that there is no minority on any leadership position in the church is, I guess, quite telling about this church and where they are as far as being all-inclusive and multi-cultural. I think because the church some time ago opened up and said, "We're open and accepting to blacks." But I guess I worry about, for the time that I've been here, is that we've been here at least BCOC is open. But openness doesn't mean so much that you have to go and you accept people, just all kinds of people but you also should learn something from them as much as what they learn from you. And I don't exactly get that at BCOC, and it's often times you have to explain sometimes I go to different churches just because you don't get all the emotional things that you sometimes need to get here at the church because the people just aren't aware of what to do. And I think that would help a whole lot.*

And I think the leadership of BCOC should take that more seriously instead of that being more experimental, just kind of haphazardly.”

Every gifted person has serious crosses in their lives. The things that we like to do, the things that gives us the most pleasure are the things that cause us most stress. The answer to the problems of Sarah’s and any person’s serious reality is to learn how to manage our gifts and realities. To sum it up, Sarah’s serious realities are those things that are her gifts. The serious realities that some members of the congregation have cited are the sense of call, responsibility, intent focus on getting things done, emotional investment and diversity training. I believe that any Pastor, and Sarah must remember, that we are not perfect, but we are still in the process of becoming who we are, a child of God’s Life is a matter of learning by trial and error, and perfecting and enjoying life as we journey.

The Birkman Method is a premier assessment instrument used to identify the strengths and developmental needs of individuals and teams. Sarah took this instrument on June 21, 2005. This instrument helps people understand themselves more clearly, develop better relationships and make wise career choices based on interests and motivational patterns. The instrument has a Lifestyle Grid, tells the kinds of activities that individuals are **interested** in, **usual** style, **needs**, and **what is likely to happen to a person under stress**. Sarah’s grid shows that her interest lies in **creative activities**. These activities emphasize indirect involvement (with a task or with people). Sarah’s grid emphasizes people rather than the tasks that people do. This means that she likes to do the following:

- 1.) Innovate or create
- 2.) Plan how to do things
- 3.) Consider the future
- 4.) Create new approaches

5.) Look at things theoretically

These activities are very true to the person of Sarah. In the interview process with her church members, a number of her members stated that she was into planning, she loves to write and she takes the time to think out her plans before she executes them.

The next area of the grid is **usual styles**. This part of the grid shows that Sarah is probably:

- 1.) Detached and concentrative
- 2.) Organized and consistent

She also tends to be:

- 1.) Insightful
- 2.) Selectively sociable
- 3.) Thoughtful

Because Sarah is a creative person, she oftentimes likes to be by herself and do the things she likes to do. She likes to be around people, but she may not necessarily attend receptions because of her selective process to have quality conversations with others. She is very thoughtful of other peoples' feelings and she will oftentimes call, send a note, or email individuals to check on them.

Needs is another area on the grid that describes the kind of support or motivation a person needs to show their usual style. Sarah's score shows that she may respond well to an environment, which encourages a subjective approach. To be most effective, Sarah may respond best to people who are reflective and creative. She is most comfortable when people around her do the following:

- 1.) Show they appreciate you
- 2.) Are interested in feelings as well as logic
- 3.) Give you time for complex decisions
- 4.) Give you time alone or with one or two others
- 5.) Don't over schedule you

Sarah's staff can resonate with this section of the grid. They feel that she is organized, into scheduling and being on time. She is intent on making sure that her flock is taking care of. One can look at her planning and see that she schedules her time, and that she tries to include many in her schedule. However, she is very good about keeping her Thursdays and Fridays for herself and family.

The final area of the grid describes the **stress behavior** of an individual. This area looks at behavior that individuals may exhibit when stressed. Sarah's stress behavior may include the following:

- 1.) Withdrawing
- 2.) Fatigued
- 3.) Indecisive
- 4.) Pessimistic
- 5.) Overly sensitive to criticism

Sarah usually withdraws when she is under stress. She knows in order to overcome the stress she needs to bring projects that she may be involved in to a close. She also needs to have direct communication in order to work. These tie in with her need to be able to set and organize her goals

Sarah Shelton is a woman called by God to lead people to God. She is in her way another Mary. Mary the Mother of God was one who heard the Word of God and believed in His Word. God called Mary and asked her to bear a child. Mary was the Theotokos, the bearer of God for the world and the nation. Mary's call from God was one that she embraced but one that caused her great controversy and pain. Mary remained faithful to her call, and is honored by all Catholics. Sarah, like Mary, is one who heard the call of Jesus to pastor His people. Her call has been one of controversy

because she is a woman in a denomination that does not believe. The Baptist believe that women should not pastor. They do not embrace her call to follow Jesus in the way that she has responded to Jesus. This call, which is dear to her heart, is one that causes her pain.

Her pain, of others not recognizing her call and respecting it and her brokenness allows her to minister to others. Like Mary, her pain is deep, because it is one of rejection, respect and love, but it is one that causes her and her community confusion, because they cannot understand how its church principles and teachings of Jesus are blatantly rejected. However, she continues to remain faithful to seeking her God and serving her God. She is a “Theotokos”, because she tries in word and deed to help, people come to know Jesus and serve Him. Sarah’s people, the Baptist Church of the Covenant are very proud and honored to have her as a Pastor.

In her own words, Sarah says, *“I think some of the things I’ve brought to this congregation, in particular, that they haven’t had before are... I think they have had pastors who are really good in the pulpit and I think they’ve had pastors who have had big dreams and big visions. What I have brought to them in a different way is a pastor who has a compassionate heart and who is willing to walk the valley of the shadow with them, so to speak, and who’s willing to do that no matter who the member is. And some of the pastors here who have done that in the past, but what I hear from the congregation is that they would only do it with certain select ones. I hope, what I attempt to do, is if I offer myself to one, I offer myself to everybody.”*

Like Mary, Pastor Sarah Shelton is one who hears the call of Jesus, to go forth and make a difference in the world, to embrace the pains and suffering that go with the

call, to listen, to speak, to act. Mary had a “Magnificat” (Luke 1:36-48) a moment in her life when she realized what God had done, was doing and was going to do. Mary’s Magnificat was her song of Praise and Thanksgiving to God for bringing her through. It was her reason to celebrate. Sarah too has a Magnificat. She knows her God, and she knows what God has done, what God is doing, and what God said he would do. Therefore, Sarah can celebrate! Because her being encountered God through the experience of pain, rejection and jubilation, her being gives thanks to God. Sarah Shelton can say, **“My Soul Does Magnify the Lord For God Is Good To Me!**

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