

Dear Committee Chair Prozanski, Vice Chair Thatcher and members of the committee,

I was ordained by Shalom Baptist Church in Louisville, Kentucky in 1993. I first entered the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in January 1982 to begin my masters program during the early days of the Controversy among Southern Baptists. This controversy between fundamentalist and moderate Southern Baptists centered on issues of biblical inerrancy, denominational polity, and women. My entire 5 ½ year seminary experience for the MA and PhD was sharply defined by this denominational fight and its challenge to my very calling to ministry.

When I graduated in 1987, I took a teaching position in the Religion Department at California Baptist College. While my colleagues and students were supportive, the California Baptist Convention was not ready for a young, feminist woman teaching religion, and so the first four years of my career were marked by personal and professional attacks from pastors and parents who did not want someone like me teaching religion at their Baptist college. In this atmosphere, I did not dare seek ordination.

I left Cal Baptist for George Fox College, knowing Quakers had a much richer tradition of supporting women. There I found the openness to request ordination from the church I had attended during my last few years of seminary in Louisville. Shalom Baptist Church was a small, inner city, biracial congregation committed to social justice. Unfortunately, some years after my ordination, the church no longer had the resources to continue its existence, and so it closed.

In Baptist polity, ordination is a matter for the local church and the local church alone. Ordination is for life, unless the minister renounces it or the same local church that gave it revokes it. Therefore, despite the fact that Shalom Baptist Church ceased to exist, my ordination remains valid.

During the time shortly after I was ordained, Oregon law required ministers to register their certificate of ordination with a county and receive a number to be used on marriage licenses. I did so after my ordination. A few years later, the legislature changed the law and required the minister to record on the license the name of the “authorizing congregation,” along with an address and phone number.

I was unaware of this change when I conducted a wedding and listed Shalom Baptist Church, Louisville, KY on the license. After I submitted it, the county clerk called and told me I had to have an address and phone number. I explained that the congregation no longer exists. He asked if the local association could be listed. I explained that I didn't know if the church had even reported the ordination to the association, and, even so, in Baptist polity, the association does not have the authority to authorize a minister. Then he suggested I get an online ordination. I don't know that I've ever been so offended in my life. I spent my years in seminary and the early years of my career fighting for the right to express my calling through ordination, and somehow the county clerk suggested that an online ordination would be more valid in the eyes of the State of

Oregon because then I would have an address and phone number for the authorizing congregation.

I am now a member of Ainsworth United Church of Christ in Portland. My ordination, however, is still Baptist. I called Ainsworth UCC and explained the problem, and the church “authorized” me so I could perform weddings, but this makes no sense in terms of the polities of either Baptists or the UCC.

With the current license requirements, I understand the State of Oregon to be defining a church and defining ordination. According to current law, an ordination is only valid in the State for performing weddings if the church that granted the ordination has a current address and phone number. Nonetheless, Baptist polity does not require this, and I am still ordained within the framework of Baptist polity, whether or not my ordaining congregation still exists. By not acknowledging the validity of my ordination (without the “authorization” of Ainsworth UCC), the State has, I believe, violated my First Amendment rights by arbitrarily defining what is or isn’t a valid ordination for performing weddings in the State of Oregon. I believe the State has both established religion by showing preference for religious institutions with a current address and phone number and prohibited the free exercise of religion by making my legitimate ordination invalid as a credential to serve as a wedding officiant in the State of Oregon.

I ask that you rectify this situation by passing SB 751 to drop the requirement for an address and phone number for the authorizing congregation.

Thank you.

Susan M. Shaw
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