

# Breaking Through the Stained Glass Ceiling?

*Women's Participation in Leadership in Australian Baptist Churches*

## **Background**

In the 1980's and 1990s gender roles were the subject of intense debate within the Evangelical community in Australia and beyond. Australian Baptists were part of this.

On the one hand "Complementarians"<sup>i</sup> maintained that at the same time that men and women are equal in value and dignity and gifted for ministry, God calls men to a position of leadership in the church and home and calls women to respond generously and supportively to this leadership. For Complementarians this was to maintain a distinctively biblical approach to masculinity and femininity against the more secular influence of feminism. With respect to ministry in the churches Complementarians celebrated the gifting of men and women, including capacities of leadership and teaching, yet they were convinced that gender must shape how those giftings were to be used. Some Complementarians (whom we will refer to as "Strict Complementarians") maintained that women gifted as leaders and teachers should exercise their gifts to the full with women and children but not in organised ministries that included men<sup>ii</sup>. Others (whom we will refer to as "Relaxed Complementarians") argued that the core issue was not teaching but the exercise of authority in the church. Thus as long as the primary spiritual authority lay in the hands of gifted and called men suitably gifted women could teach Scripture and doctrine to men<sup>iii</sup>. While there will remain some debate among Complementarians as to the ways this works out in practise both Strict and Relaxed Complementarians could be expected to value and promote the ministry of women in a variety of roles traditionally dominated by men, such as being children's and youth ministers, worship ministers, evangelists, women's ministers, pastoral carers, Church Secretaries and Treasurers. Relaxed Complementarians could also be expected to encourage women into more traditional pastoral roles such as preaching and teaching, lecturing in theological colleges, and participating in a church leadership team where the senior leader was a man.

"Egalitarians", by contrast, argued that God calls women and men to partner together in leadership in the church and home and that leadership responsibilities should be determined on the basis of character and gifting, not gender. They believed that the reality of our churches, where women were numerically underrepresented in leadership, represented the triumph of tradition, misuse of power and unjust gender discrimination over the biblical call for women and men to use their gifts to serve the church. Egalitarians maintained that if the church is to maximise its life, witness and mission there must be strenuous efforts to undo the gender imbalances left to us by tradition and we must work towards a reality where women and men are equitably represented on church leadership teams (whether diaconates, elderships or under some other name) and church pastoral teams. On

this basis Egalitarians could be expected to encourage suitably gifted women into all ministry domains traditionally dominated by men, including employment as pastors, pastoral team leaders, associate pastors, elders, deacons, and the like.

Given the Baptist emphasis on the autonomy of the local church and the liberty of conscience it was inappropriate for Australia's State Baptist Unions to impose either a Complementarian or Egalitarian perspective on the churches. Consequently, some States sought to create an environment in which churches could function according to their conviction. In NSW, for example, the denomination ceased ordaining people for pastoral ministry, opting to devolve this to the local church. The denomination 'accredits' men and women for ministry, recognising them as gifted for ministries of leadership, teaching, mission and care and as possessing suitable training and character to be commended for such ministries. Ordination to particular ministries is the responsibility of the churches, allowing them to ordain men and women to ministries that conform with their understanding of gender roles.

The question we pose in this paper is whether the rhetoric around gender matches the reality. At the time of the 'gender debates' of the 1980s and 1990s it became evident that the reality of women's participation in a range of ministries fell short of that demanded by the rhetoric of both Complementarians and Egalitarians. So since the Evangelical gender discussions of the 1980s and 1990s what change has occurred in Baptist churches across Australia?

## Methodology

This paper proceeds by comparing the ministry roles of women and men in 1998, as recorded in State Baptist Union handbooks, with the same in 2008. This permits us to test against two measures:

1. Women serving in pastoral roles in local churches. These are defined as staffed positions in pastoral rather than administrative areas, and include people serving as employed church staff in the areas of youth ministry, children's ministry, pastoral care, evangelism as well as sole pastors, senior pastors and 'associate' pastors. We have not distinguished between ordained and non-ordained and when considering figures for total numbers of pastors we have not distinguished between roles (eg sole pastor, associate pastor, team leader, 'pastoral assistant' [the term used in some States for women serving in a pastoral role]).

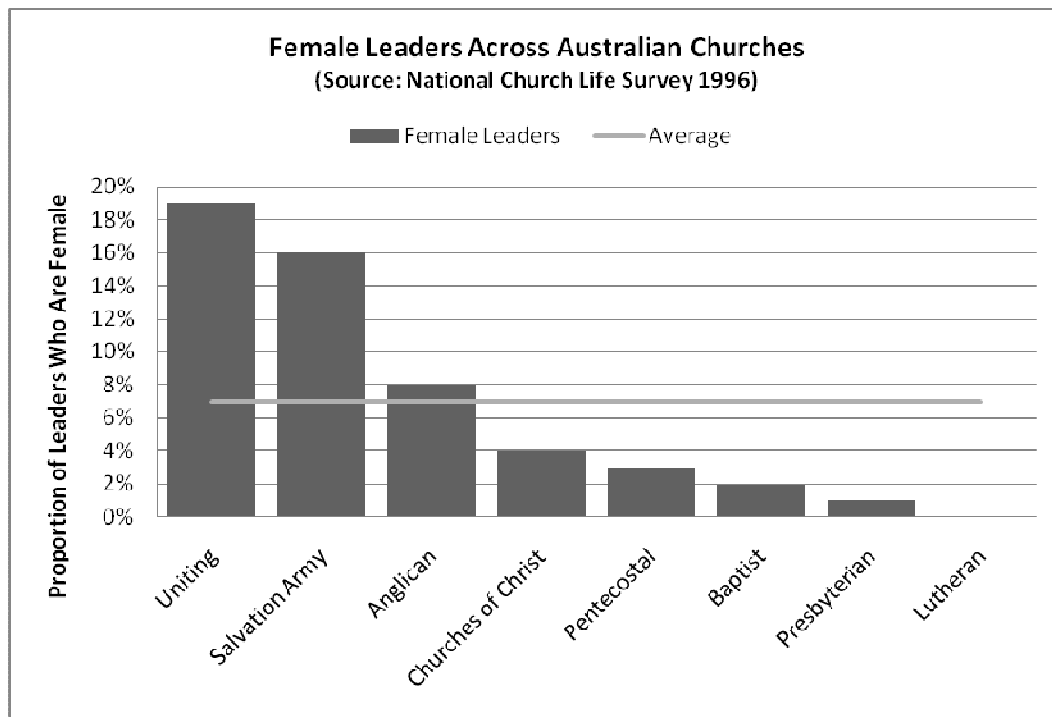
Given pastoral staff are typically central to the life and ministry of churches, that a financial value is placed upon their ministry, and traditionally have been male this serves as a useful proxy for the involvement of women in pastoral ministry areas. To ensure the focus remains fixed on the realities in local churches we have avoided examination of listings of recognised ministers as those who are recognised may not be serving in a local church context.

2. Women serving as Church Treasurers, Secretaries or Administrators. Historically, Treasurers, Secretaries and Administrators are positions of some centrality to the organisational life of churches. Secretaries and Treasurers play key roles on church administrative bodies such as diaconates and so this measure can serve as a proxy for women's involvement at a non-staff level in an area not typically considered 'pastoral'.

For each State with the exception of South Australia we have used the 1998 State Union handbook to glean data for our base period. For South Australia the earliest handbook we were able to access was 1999, which we have used. For the end period we have used the 2008 handbooks for each State, with the exception of Western Australia where the 2005 handbook was the latest available to us.

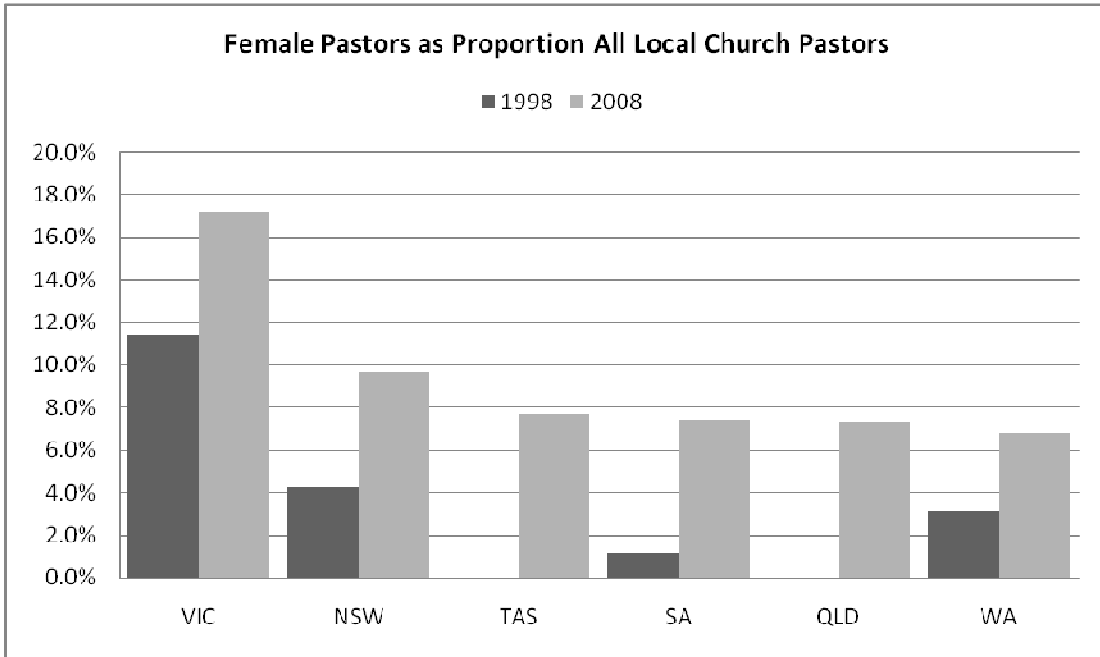
### Men and Women Serving as Pastors

In the mid 1990s few women were employed in positions of pastoral leadership in Australian Baptist churches, not only relative to total number of pastors, but also in comparison to other denominations.

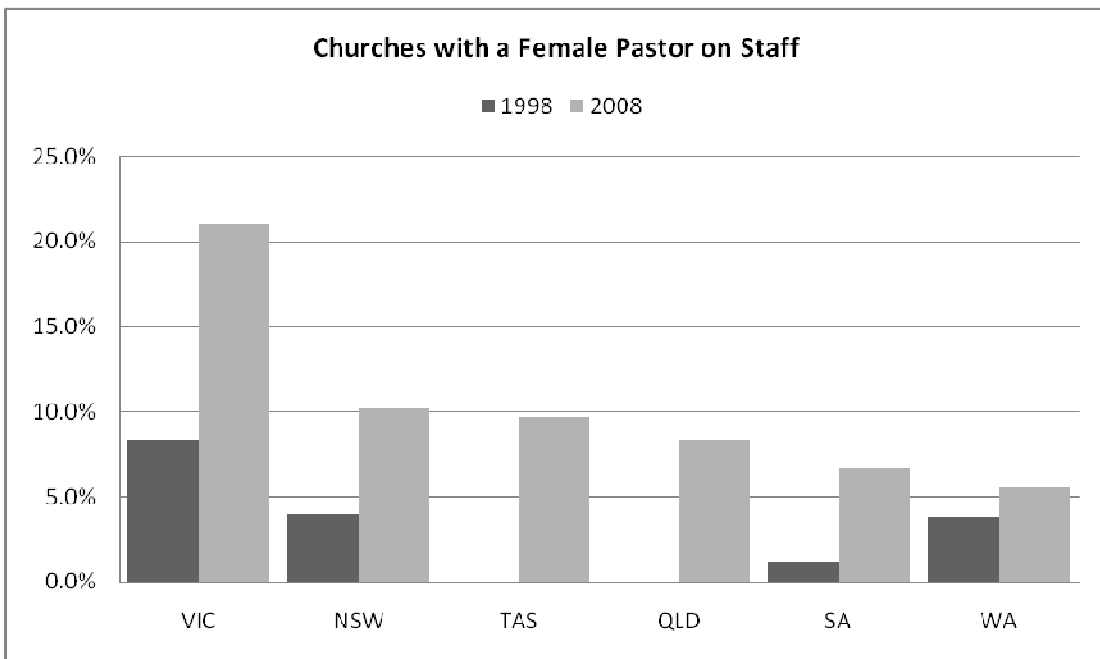


There have been significant changes since the mid 1990s. Nationally, 11.7% of all people serving in a staff pastoral position in a Baptist church are women. This represents a total of 134 women serving in a staffed pastoral position out of a total of 1253 people serving in a staffed pastoral position.

There has been an increase in every State in the representation of women as pastors in Baptist churches. The highest proportion of women serve in Victoria (17.2%), followed by NSW (9.7%), Tasmania (7.7%), South Australia (7.4%), Queensland (7.3%) and Western Australia (6.8%).

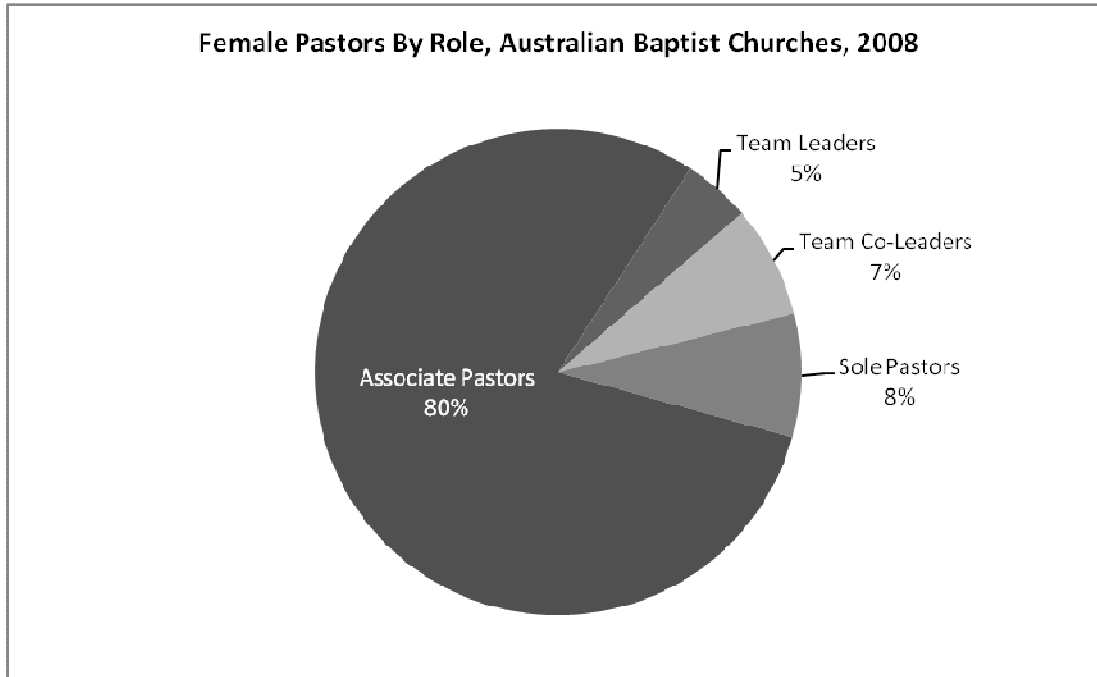


Given some churches have more than one female pastor on staff it is helpful to look at the number of churches that have at least one woman serving on the pastoral staff. Again Victoria has the highest number. Two out of every ten Victorian churches has a woman serving on the pastoral staff. Elsewhere in Australia the figure is one in ten or less. The converse is also true. With the exception of Victoria, attendees at nine out of every ten Baptist Churches do not experience a woman serving in a staffed pastoral role.



## Pastoral Roles

The vast majority of women pastors serve on a pastoral team (92%). Most serve in an “Associate” role, that is, they are not the ministry team leader. Five percent of female pastors lead a ministry team, while seven percent share leadership in a ministry team. Eight percent serve as sole pastors.



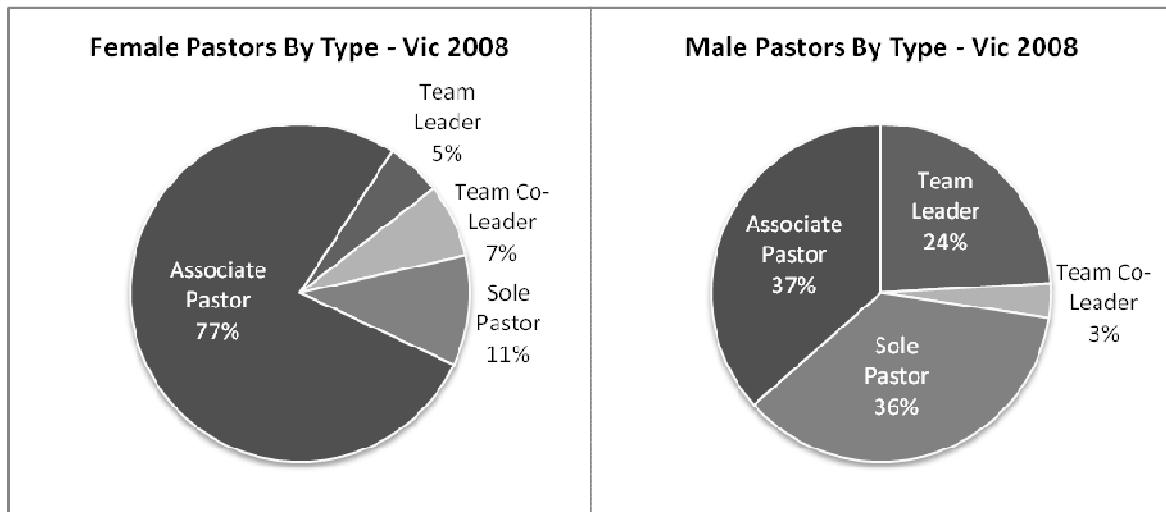
State by State there is some significant variation. In 2008 NSW and Victoria were the only States with women serving as leaders of a pastoral team. Each State bar Western Australia had at least one woman co-leading a pastoral team, while NSW, Queensland, Western Australia and Victoria had at least one woman serving as the sole pastor in a church. With the exception of Tasmania, where the sample is very small, the largest proportion of women in each State were serving in an Associate role.

**Female Pastoral Roles By State 2008 (2005 for WA)**

	TAS	SA	NSW	QLD	WA	VIC
<b>Team Leader</b>	0	0	3	0	0	3
<b>Team Co-Leader</b>	1	2	2	1	0	4
<b>Sole Pastor</b>	0	0	3	1	1	6
<b>Associate</b>	1	4	33	18	7	44

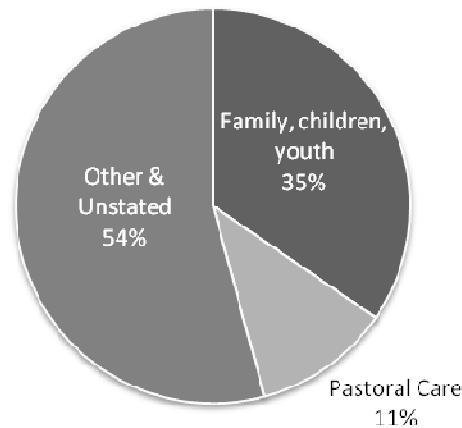
The pattern for female pastors is very different for that of men. The chart below demonstrates the roles of female and male pastors for Victoria in 2008. Where almost 8 in 10 female pastors serve in an associate role, this is true for around 4 in 10 male pastors. One in ten female pastors are sole pastors, as opposed to one in three men, and where only one in twenty female pastors leads a pastoral team, one-quarter of all male pastors lead a team.

Given Victoria has a high proportion of women serving as sole pastors, team leaders and co-leaders the proportionate differences will be even greater in other States.



Those who serve as Associates can do so with a specific focus or with more generalised pastoral duties. Approximately one in three women serving in an Associate role serve as a family, children’s or youth pastor, while just over one in ten serve in a pastoral care type role. In NSW, Queensland and Victoria, the States for which there is a statistically significant pattern, the results were roughly similar. The numbers in each category may or may not be significantly higher given around 40% of the listings for female Associate pastors did not designate a particular responsibility.

**Female Associate Pastors By Role, Australian Baptist Churches, 2008**

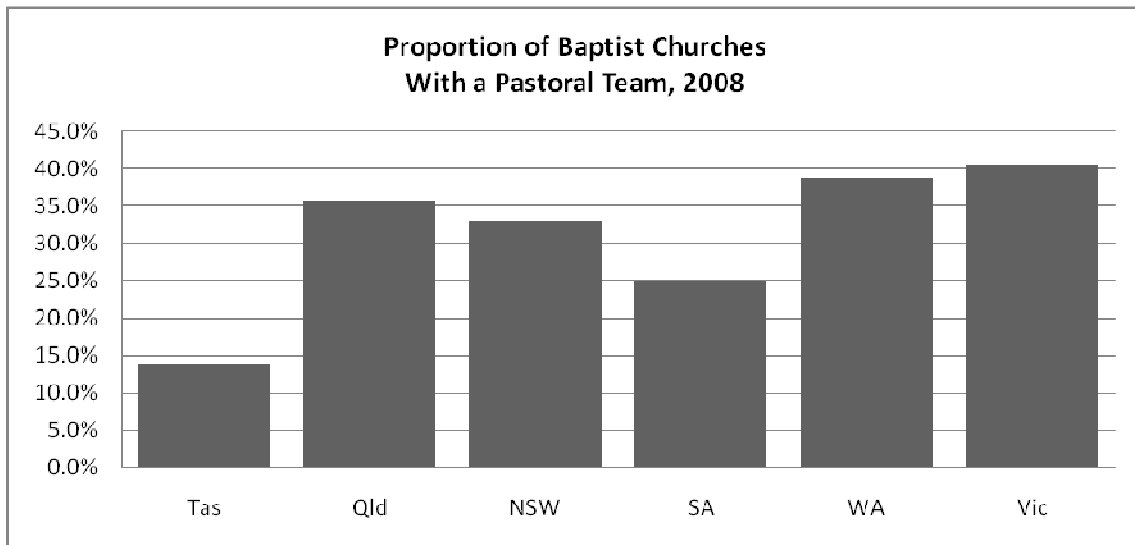


**Female Associate Pastor Roles by State 2008**

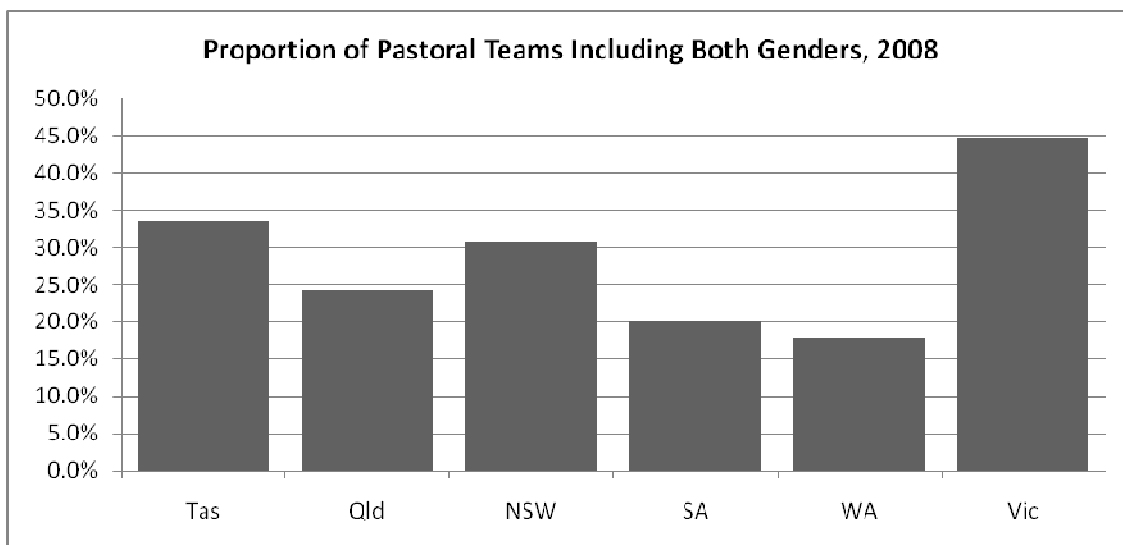
	TAS	SA	NSW	QLD	WA	VIC
<b>Family, children, youth</b>	1	0	13	5	4	14
<b>Pastoral Care</b>	0	0	3	4	0	5
<b>Other &amp; Unstated</b>	0	4	17	9	3	25

**Pastoral Teams**

As noted above, nine in ten female pastors serve in a pastoral team environment. This suggests the prevalence of pastoral teams is particularly significant to opportunities for women to serve pastorally. Nationally, one third (34.4% in 2008) of Baptist churches have a team ministry, understood as two or more people in a staff pastoral role. State by State there is significant variation, with a low of 13.6% in Tasmania and a high of 41% in Victoria.

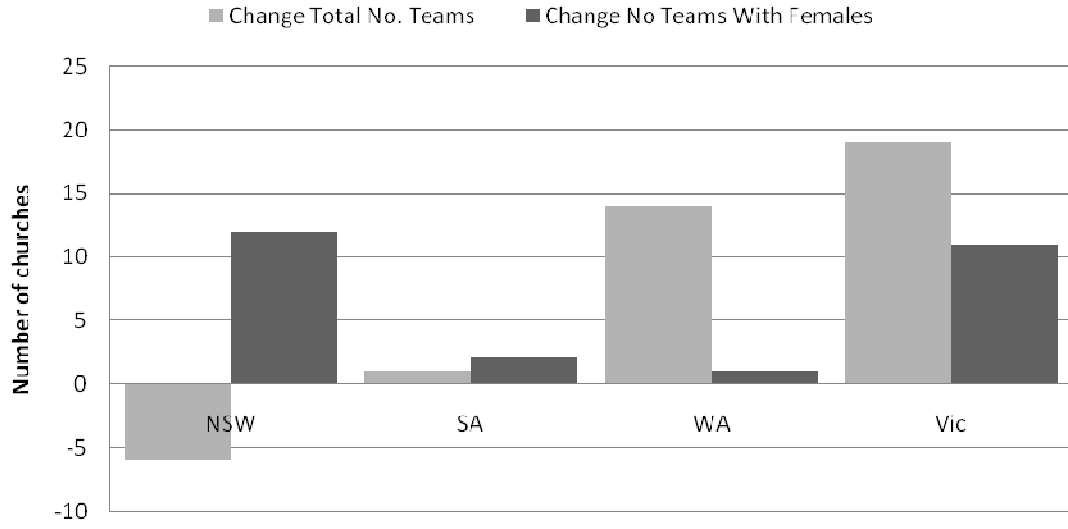


When these teams are examined for gender breakdown, around one-quarter nationally include at least one male and one female pastor.



It is of interest to note that in the last decade in NSW there was an increase in the number of churches with a pastoral team including at least one female at the same time that the total number of teams declined. In South Australia and Victoria there was an increase in the number of churches with pastoral teams and the rate of increase in teams including females outstripped that of the growth in male only teams. Only in Western Australia did the rate of growth of all male teams outpace the rate of growth in teams including women.

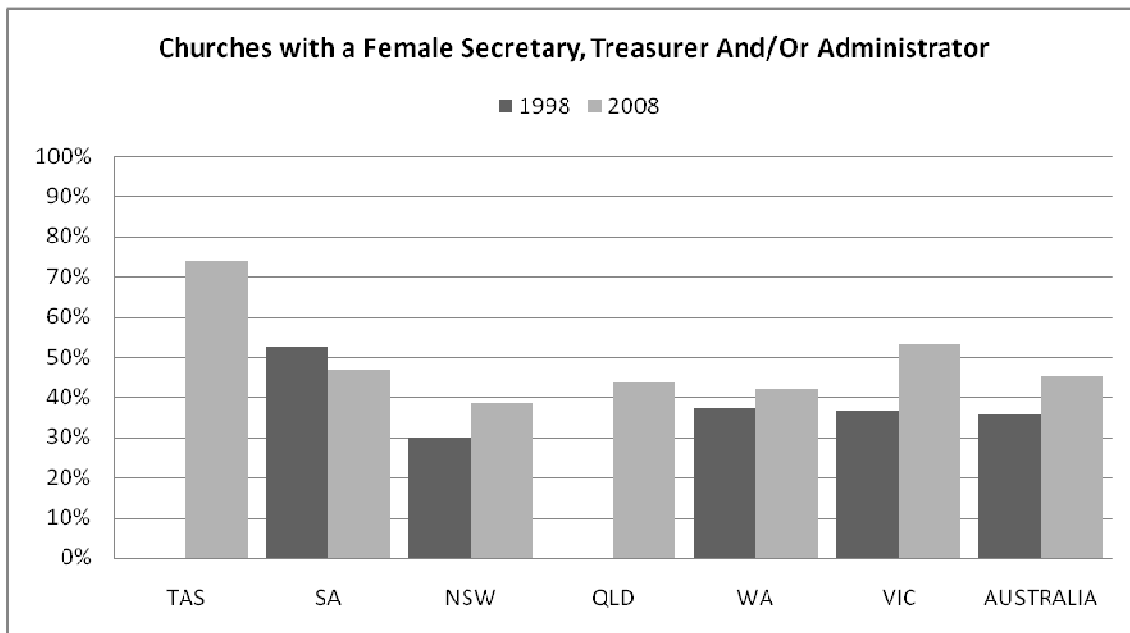
### Changes in Teams 1998-2008



## Church Secretaries, Treasurers and Administrators

Our second proxy indicator for women's involvement in church leadership is the prevalence of women serving as church secretaries, treasurers or administrators. This is an area of some interest as these are roles that Complementarians and Egalitarians would commonly agree should be open to gifted people regardless of their gender.

Australia wide women serve in the role of secretary, treasurer or administrator in 45.4% of churches, a modest increase over the 35.7% of 1998. In all States for which we have 1998 data (SA, NSW, WA, Vic) the proportion of churches with a female serving in one or more of these roles has increased, with the exception of South Australia, where there has been a slight decline. Nonetheless, participation rates in South Australia remain higher than all other States with the exception of Tasmania and Victoria.



The data should not be read to imply that a rate of 50% is gender equitable. The vast majority of churches listed entries for two or three roles (ie Secretary, Treasurer, Administrator. We excluded churches without any entry from our totals). Thus for NSW the figure of 38.5% indicates that around four in ten churches have a woman in the Secretary or Treasurer role. For gender equity to prevail the figures should approach 75-100% (ie one woman and one man in each role, with an error margin to allow for situations where some churches have two women filling the roles while others have two men). On this basis only Tasmania is approaching gender equity in these roles.

## Conclusions

The data allow a number of conclusions to be drawn.

1. The participation of women in pastoral and administrative leadership roles in Baptist churches in Australia has increased in the course of the last ten years. In Victoria the number of female pastors has almost doubled (30 in 1998, 57 in 2008); in NSW the numbers have more than doubled (17 in 1998, 41 in 2008); in Queensland the numbers have more than tripled (2 “Pastoral Assistants” in 1998, 7 in 2007<sup>iv</sup>); and in South Australia there has been a sixfold increase (1 in 1998, 6 in 2008).
2. Despite the increases, women remain substantially underrepresented in staffed pastoral roles. Given the rhetoric of both Complementarian and Egalitarian Baptists that God gifts women and men to lead, teach, care and administer and that the church suffers when women and men are not encouraged to fully employ their giftings, it is noteworthy that the reality falls short of this. From a Complementarian perspective we would expect to see much greater numbers of women serving on church pastoral teams in ministries to children, youth and women, in pastoral care, worship, community formation, and in the case of Relaxed Complementarians, in bible teaching. From an Egalitarian perspective the underrepresentation of women is vast both in terms of the proportion of women serving in pastoral ministry compared to men and in the roles they play. It is striking that staffed pastoral ministry opportunities across Australia are, for women, mostly restricted to serving in an Associate role on a pastoral team.
3. The underrepresentation of women on church pastoral staffs is mirrored by an underrepresentation of women in non-staff administrative roles. Given few objections could be raised to participation on biblical grounds, Baptist churches appear to be carrying into the present the legacy of our gender unequal past.

This report was prepared for Baptists Today, 2008 by Rev Scott Higgins

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<sup>i</sup> We have adopted this language as it is often the chosen label of those holding to the position described. We have attempted to employ non-perjorative language throughout this paper and no labels, such as “Strict Complementarian” or “Relaxed Complementarian”, terms we have crafted to summarise nuanced positions among Complementarians should be taken as anything other than non-perjorative shorthand.

<sup>ii</sup> See for example Stinson, R., and Cowan, C. (2008), “Women in Ministry: Practical Application of Biblical Teaching” *Journal for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, Spring 2008:17-22. They say “[T]he Bible affirms the valuable and necessary role of women serving in Christian ministry. A church in which women are not encouraged and granted opportunity to serve as vital members of the Christian community is both disobedient and unhealthy. Yet...God’s word...also gives specific instruction regarding the roles of men and women in the church...Christian women are called by God to serve the church, with the exception of teaching or having authority over men in the church..Thus we believe a woman is prohibited from holding any office or position in the church that would require her either to teach Scripture/Christian doctrine to men or to exercise authority over men...” On this basis they advise that women should not be elders/overseers/pastors, teach a mixed gender adult bible class, or teach mixed gender groups in a seminary, parachurch ministry or at bible

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conferences. Women may however lead and teach in children's and youth ministries (children and youth are still under the primary authority of their parents), lead worship, or sit on the Board of Directors of a parachurch ministry (given the Board as a whole rather than as individuals exercises authority).

<sup>iii</sup> See for example John Stott, (1984), *Issues Facing Christians Today*. Marshall, Morgan and Scott. In a later dialogue with David Edwards, Stott says "Part of the essence of Paul's teaching concerns masculine 'headship', to be redefined (as you say) in terms of care rather than control, but still rooted in our created sexuality...The first century cultural expression of this headship, however, related to such practices as veiling, coiffure, jewellery and (in my view) the requirement of silence or not teaching men. My struggle (which I have not yet resolved) is how to give women the fullest opportunities to exercise their God-given gifts, and to enable both sexes to enjoy their 'neither male nor female' equality...without infringing the creational truths of masculinity, femininity and 'headship'..." Edwards and Stott, (1988) *Essentials*. Hodder and Stoughton. Of course, Complementarian perspectives should not be reduced to the two cited in this paper. Between them lie a range of other possible Complementarian perspectives.

<sup>iv</sup> Note that for 2008 we identified 20 women in pastoral roles in Queensland but we lacked figures for 1998. Email correspondence indicated an increase in "Pastoral Assistants", which refers to women in recognised pastoral roles, from 2 in 1998 to 7 in 2007.