

Saddleback Church ordains three women, draws criticism

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LAKE FOREST, Calif. (RNS)—Saddleback Church, one of the largest churches in the Southern Baptist Convention and home to influential pastor Rick Warren, ordained three women as staff pastors, a move critics say violates the denomination's statement of faith.

"Yesterday was a historic night for Saddleback Church in many ways!" the Southern California megachurch's Facebook page announced on May 8. "We ordained our first three women pastors, Liz Puffer, Cynthia Petty and Katie Edwards!"

The three newly ordained pastors are long-time Saddleback staffers. Petty has worked with children's ministry and Edwards has been in youth ministry, while Puffer's Linked-In profile lists her as a "minister" at Saddleback.

'In direct conflict' with doctrinal statement

Calling them—or any woman—a pastor is, "at best, unwise and confusing," wrote Al Mohler, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky.

The 2000 Baptist Faith & Message, the SBC's doctrinal statement, states that "the office of pastor is limited to men as qualified by Scripture."

In recent years, some Southern Baptists have argued that limit only applies to the office of senior pastor. Mohler, who served on the committee that

revised the statement of faith, rejects that idea and said no one in the group made that distinction. Ordaining a woman pastor, as Saddleback has done, violates Baptist and biblical teaching, Mohler asserted.

“Saddleback has taken actions that place itself in direct conflict with the stated doctrines of the Southern Baptist Convention,” he told Religion News Service.

In an online post, Mohler compared women preachers to a looming storm over the convention. He blamed women pastors for the “feminization of liberal Protestantism” and the decline of liberal churches.

“Liberal theology is the kiss of death for any church or denomination,” he wrote. “Little remains but social justice activism and deferred maintenance.”

Saddleback Church did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

Mohler, a candidate for president of the SBC at the denomination’s upcoming annual meeting, stopped short of saying Saddleback should be removed from the SBC. That’s a decision for messengers to the annual meeting, he said.

Baptist Press, the SBC news service, quote all four candidates for SBC president as affirming the 2000 Baptist Faith & Message prohibition on women pastors.

Large and influential church



Rick Warren, pastor of Saddleback Church and best-selling author of "The Purpose Driven Life."

Saddleback's decision to ordain women was important because of the size and influence of the congregation, Mohler said. Led by Warren, a bestselling author, Saddleback draws more than 28,000 in attendance and is the second-largest church in the Southern Baptist Convention, according to the latest 2019 data available from LifeWay Research. Only Second Baptist Church in Houston is larger.

Mike Stone, another candidate for the SBC presidency, also criticized Saddleback, saying the church's actions violated the Baptist Faith and Message and should be investigated.

He called Saddleback's decision to ordain women "a historic departure from biblical Baptist ecclesiology."

"Do I think the ordination of women pastors is a basis for inquiry by the SBC Credentials Committee?" he said on a podcast discussing the ordinations at Saddleback. "Absolutely and unequivocally yes."

Southern Baptist congregations, Stone said, don't have to agree with every point of the Baptist Faith and Message as long as they agree in general on

doctrine. But women pastors is a different matter, according to Stone. A church that ordains women pastors, he said, "should be removed from our fellowship of churches, if some additional information does not mitigate this concern."

Not everyone falls in line

Some of the most prominent Southern Baptist churches take a different line. Kay Warren, wife of Rick Warren, preached this weekend at Saddleback's Mother's Day services, while speaker and author Anne Graham Lotz preached at Second Baptist in Houston.

"You will not want to miss Anne Graham Lotz, the 'best preacher' her dad Billy Graham ever heard!" Ed Young, former SBC president and pastor of Second Baptist, said in an online invitation to the congregation.



Beth Moore is founder of Living Proof Ministries in Houston.
(Courtesy Photo)

Bible teacher Beth Moore, who recently announced she no longer identifies as a Southern Baptist, preached Sunday at Lake Pointe Church in Rockwall, an SBC congregation that draws more than 14,000 in attendance. Lake Pointe, named one of the fastest-growing congregations in the country by Outreach magazine, lists a number of women as "kids' pastors."

Moore inadvertently sparked a renewed debate over the role of women in church two years ago, when she tweeted a joke about speaking in a church on Mother's Day. At the time, the SBC was grappling with revelations about significant sexual abuse in its ranks.

"We were in the middle of the biggest sexual abuse scandal that has ever hit our denomination," she told RNS in a March interview, announcing that she no longer considers herself a Southern Baptist. "And suddenly, the most important thing to talk about was whether or not a woman could stand at the pulpit and give a message."

What has gone before

Several churches have been removed from local associations or state conventions after appointing women as pastors. But Southern Baptist groups have not always seen a church having a woman pastor as a deal-breaker.



Julie Pennington-Russell

In the 1990s, the California Baptist Convention refused to recognize delegates from Nineteenth Avenue Baptist Church in San Francisco after the church called Julie Pennington-Russell as pastor. When Pennington-Russell went to Calvary Baptist Church in Waco, the church remained part of the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

By contrast, the Georgia Baptist Convention cut ties with First Baptist Church of Decatur, Ga., two years after Pennington-Russell became pastor there. Pennington-Russell, who now pastors a Baptist church in Washington, D.C., told RNS she is no longer a part of the SBC.

Pennington-Russell said she was thrilled to hear the news of the ordinations at Saddleback and hopes other evangelical churches will follow their example. She saw the ordinations as another sign that the “gospel is good news for people.”

“I think that for conservative evangelical people who love God and want to do better, this step that Saddleback has taken can be a good thing—and I wish them well.”

The ban on women pastors was instrumental in convincing hundreds of Baptist churches to defect from the SBC, after a vanguard of conservatives, known by supporters as the “Conservative Resurgence,” took over the denomination in the 1980s and '90s. Those churches formed the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, which now claims about 1,400 churches. Some of those congregations have dual affiliations with the SBC.

Mohler told RNS churches with women pastors often have voluntarily decided to leave the convention since they no longer agree with its doctrinal positions.

After the seminary president tweeted about the ban on women preachers being a long-standing position of Southern Baptists, he got a lighthearted response from Beth Moore.

“Happy Mother’s Day, Al,” she tweeted.