

After controversies, SBC turns to a low-key leader

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CHARLOTTE, N.C. (RNS)—As he stepped up into the old-fashioned wooden pulpit on a recent Sunday, Pastor Clint Pressley wasted no time.

After quickly thanking the student discipleship minister who had brought many of the church's Camp Paradise teens to the 11 a.m. service at his church, Hickory Grove Baptist, Pressley turned to the task at hand.

"Mark chapter 14," he intoned in his Southern drawl. "If you're a guest with us, we read the Bible, and then we just talk about the Bible. You're going to find it feels a lot like a Bible study. Mark 14 starting in verse one ..."

After relating the first 10 verses that tell the story of the woman who anoints Jesus with a bottle of expensive perfume, he drives home the passage's lesson with a series of questions.

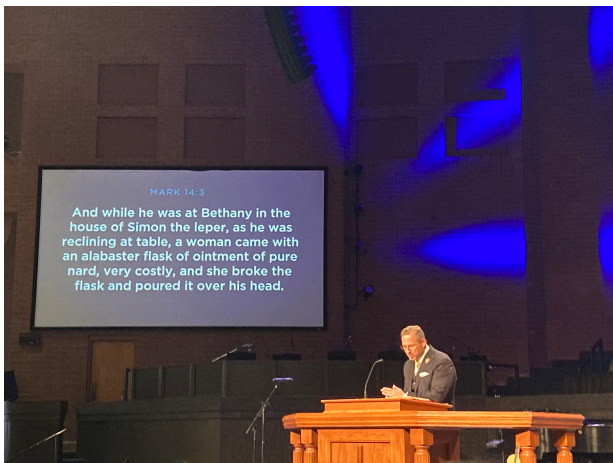
"You have one life to live," he said. "Pour it out. Have you done what you could? What's holding you back? I want your life to be all-out devotion to God."

This was Pressley's third sermon of the day. He preached the 8 a.m. service, drove 13 miles to the church's second campus to preach the 10 a.m. service, and then drove back to the main campus for the 11 a.m. service.

When he concluded 40 minutes later, he shed his jacket and stood outside the doors of the cavernous chocolate-brick sanctuary, greeting worshippers on their way out—among them, his parents.

Pressley, 55, the newly elected president of the Southern Baptist Convention, is a hard-working pastor of North Carolina's fifth-largest Baptist church—whose main campus lies on a busy commercial corner of a modest suburban neighborhood of 1950s ranch homes. A K-12 private Christian school is part of the main 56-acre campus.

Pastoring a church is what he's wanted to do since he was a kid growing up in the state's Queen City. He's been devoted to the task ever since, building a multiracial, multigenerational megachurch that draws some 3,000 people each Sunday.



Pastor Clint Pressley likes to preach from a Colonial-style pulpit at Hickory Grove Baptist Church in Charlotte, N.C., on July 21. (RNS photos/Yonat Shimron)

Steadiness and integrity

Southern Baptists, the nation's largest Protestant denomination, have faced a series of challenges in recent years: [declining membership](#), [a sexual abuse crisis](#), [a crackdown on women pastors](#), [a condemnation of in vitro fertilization](#) and an [embrace of Trump and MAGA politics](#).

Yet at its last meeting in June, [its members elected](#) a traditional preacher who wears three-piece suits, a tie and monogrammed cuffs—and mostly stays out of the limelight.

“In a time where we have so much cultural chaos, Clint’s steadiness and his reputation for integrity really impress a majority of Southern Baptists,” said Nathan Finn, a professor of faith and culture at North Greenville University in South Carolina and the recording secretary for the SBC.

Pressley does not have a national following or a big social media presence. Though he is a trustee of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and has served in various other denominational roles, he is not trying to use the presidency—which he may serve for a maximum of two consecutive one-year terms—as a platform for influence.

“Really, my hope is to clear some of the fog of negativity and get us back on those two things we have: our confession and our mission,” he said of his mostly symbolic new role.

Pressley is the second North Carolina pastor to lead the SBC in less than a decade.

J.D. Greear, who served as SBC president from 2018-2021, has a national following and leads the largest SBC congregation in North Carolina, the Summit Church—with an average attendance of more than 12,000 people spread out across 13 campuses.

Bart Barber, Pressley’s immediate predecessor—who led a small, rural Texas church but was known for his expertise on denominational governance—had a large social media following and an opinion about everything.

Pressley, by comparison, is low-key. His church does not hold voter drives, and he will only refer to current events if it relates directly to the Bible

passages he is preaching on.

“He has said publicly, his goal is not to embarrass the convention,” said Chris Justice, pastor of Lee Park Church in Monroe, N.C., who nominated Pressley in June.

“His answer to things will be short, biblical and delivered in such a way so as not to generate a fight. He’s looking to guide carefully and steward the convention with humility.”

Pressley wants to tone down the acrimony.



Pastor Clint Pressley stands for a portrait in his office at Hickory Grove Baptist Church in Charlotte, N.C., on July 21. (RNS photos/Yonat Shimron)

Family and religious background

The new Southern Baptist president became a Christian in the liberal Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), where his parents belonged, when he was 11.

But on a vacation to Roanoke, Va., a few years later, a friend the Pressley

family met at the beach invited them to their Baptist church. The preacher spoke with conviction. He was authoritative and passionate.

“I’d never heard anything like that, and I thought, ‘That’s what I wanted to do,’” Pressley said.

When the family returned home to Charlotte, he encouraged his parents to seek out a Baptist church. They tried Hickory Grove and, after attending for two weeks, became members.

Pressley kept his ties to Hickory Grove while he was at Wofford College in Spartanburg, S.C., where he also played football. After graduating, Pressley’s Hickory Grove pastor suggested he go to Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth.

There he met Connie, the daughter of a Mississippi Baptist pastor, who was in her last year studying for a Master of Divinity degree with the hope of becoming a missionary. After a nine-month courtship, they were married.

“I told the Lord I was not going to marry a pastor,” Connie Pressley said. “But I was well prepared. My mom was a great pastor’s wife and was a good example for me.”

Even before they married, Connie told Clint she probably couldn’t have children. She suffered from endometriosis, a condition in which tissue similar to the uterine lining grows outside the uterus, making it difficult to conceive.

The couple considered in vitro fertilization but felt like adoption was a more biblical choice. The New Testament uses adoption as a metaphor for becoming rooted in the family of God.

Pressley completed his Master of Divinity degree at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, which was closer to Mississippi where he was

pastoring two small churches and where he and Connie adopted two boys, brothers ages 2 and 6 months, Mack and Nate.

In 1999, he came back to Hickory Grove in Charlotte as associate pastor. Five years later he became senior pastor of a midsize church in Mobile, Ala., before returning to Hickory Grove as senior pastor in 2011.

Once he became its top leader, Pressley streamlined many of the church's offerings and cut out some of the trendier, seeker-friendly outreach programs—such as cookouts and guest appearances from professional athletes.

He also sorted through the church's long list of members to winnow out hundreds of members who were no longer active.

“We kind of pared back on trying to get more people in and really tried to get the people that were there more rooted in the word” of God, said Mark Foster, a deacon and Sunday school teacher.



Pastor Clint Pressley has worked with a handful of different churches throughout the South but returned for the second time to Hickory Grove Baptist Church in 2011. (RNS photos/Yonat

Shimron)

He bucks trends

Services at Hickory Grove, like most contemporary Baptist services, feature a modern band that performs praise songs with drums and a synthesizer.

But unlike those pastors who stand in front of the stage, beside a stool or a chair, Pressley has kept the traditional Colonial-style wooden pulpit.

He also has bucked the recent trend of pastors dressed in khakis or jeans and a T-shirt.

He may prefer the buttoned-up look, but Pressley is warm and outgoing—a people person.

“He’s an incredibly encouraging person and incredibly authentic,” said Al Mohler, the president of Southern Seminary and a prominent conservative voice in the SBC.

“The public Clint Pressley and the private Clint Pressley are exactly the same man.”

Last August, Pressley’s 24-year-old son, Nate, who had been estranged from the family and living in the Washington, D.C., area, died of an apparent drug overdose. Church members said the Pressleys grieved with dignity and grace.

This year, a [volunteer was arrested](#) after church leaders learned he had been accused of sexual abuse by a student at the church’s Christian school.

The church reported the disclosure to Child Protective Services and the city’s police. Pressley notified the entire congregation by letter.

“We do not tolerate abusive behavior of any kind,” said Pressley in his

letter.

Pressley is a creature of habit, and he sticks to a routine. He said he rises at 5 a.m. most days, reads the Bible, prays and then works out—lifting weights with a group of men, mostly from the church, in his backyard shed.

He doesn't watch much TV and prefers reading books about history. He and his wife vacation—typically at a beach—with other pastor friends.

That commitment to routine serves him well and keeps him focused, said Eric Little, a member of his church with whom he also lifts weights.

“I think the reason I am drawn to pastor Clint is just his model of consistency—of what it means to be a leader, not just in the church, but in the home, in the community,” said Little.

Pressley keeps his eye trained on the long view. His favorite Bible passage is from the prophet Isaiah.

He has it engraved on the pulpit as well as painted on the wall of his office: “The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever.”