

# Church with woman pastor expects further rebuke from Georgia Baptists

January 27, 2009

DECATUR, Ga. (ABP) — A church denied voting rights in the Georgia Baptist Convention because it is led by a woman pastor could face further sanctions, Pastor Julie Pennington-Russell reports in the church newsletter.

In a recent meeting with representatives of the state convention, Pennington-Russell [said](#) she and other leaders of First Baptist Church in Decatur, Ga., were told that some individuals were not satisfied with a vote last November to refuse to receive money from the historic church — thereby making it impossible for FBC Decatur to qualify to send messengers to the annual meeting — and would likely move for full ouster this fall.

Julie Pennington-Russell

Pennington-Russell said for the first time she asked convention leaders the difference between refusing funds and withdrawing fellowship, and they said while the church could not contribute to the convention, it could still receive materials and services like training of Sunday school teachers.

Asking if that meant the state convention staff would meet with the church to help with an influx of new members needing a good foundation in the faith, Pennington-Russell said GBC Executive Director Robert White responded that he would be willing to come over a help "personally," but not as representative of the state convention.

"In that hour-long conversation it became crystal-clear to me why people are abandoning denominational structures in droves and why denominationalism as it exists today is doomed," she reported.

Pennington-Russell said she is convinced the officials in the meeting care deeply about the gospel but are "missing the point"

"The sad reality is most denominational organizations are stuck in bureaucratic systems that have forgotten why they exist in the first place," she said. She said denominations — like churches — exist not to provide goods and services to eligible "members" but to worship and serve.

Messengers at the Georgia Baptist Convention annual meeting last fall changed financial policies to for the first time permit leaders to decline gifts from churches "not in cooperation and harmony with the approved work and purpose" of the convention."

A report of the committee recommending the change said it was in response to "questions raised regarding First Baptist Church of Decatur, who has a woman as senior pastor."

While few Southern Baptist churches have called a woman as senior pastor, the denomination did not officially discourage the practice until 2000, when it amended its faith [statement](#) to specify, "While both men and women are gifted for service in the church, the office of pastor is limited to men as qualified by Scripture."

A [motion](#) at last year's SBC annual meeting called on the national body to withdraw fellowship from churches with female pastors, but the SBC Executive Committee is recommending against the change, saying there is already a mechanism for excluding a church for any reason by making a motion at the annual meeting.

While the SBC changed its constitution to disallow churches that affirm

homosexuality in 1993, denominational leaders said in a meeting last September it would be unwise to expand that prohibition into a laundry list of moral principles addressed elsewhere, such as in the *Baptist Faith & Message*.

First Baptist Church of Decatur called Pennington-Russell as pastor in 2007. While still technically part of the Southern Baptist Convention, the last two decades the 146-year-old church has identified primarily with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, a moderate breakaway group.

Before coming to Georgia, Pennington-Russell was pastor at Calvary Baptist Church in Waco, Texas, and Nineteenth Avenue Baptist Church in San Francisco, Calif. She is a graduate of Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary and earned a doctor of ministry degree at Baylor University's George W. Truett Baptist Theological Seminary.

She was a featured preacher at the New Baptist Covenant Celebration last January, a gathering of more than 30 racially, geographically and theologically diverse Baptist groups in North America.

*-Bob Allen is senior writer for Associated Baptist Press.*