

Conservative Baptist Network pledges return

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ANAHEIM, Calif. (RNS)—In the moments after the final gavel sounded to close the Southern Baptist Convention’s annual meeting last week, Rod Martin was surprisingly cheerful.

Things had not gone well during the meeting for Martin, co-founder of the Conservative Baptist Network, whose members believe the nation’s largest Protestant denomination has been invaded by “woke” ideas like critical race theory.



Rod Martin

The network’s candidate for SBC president, Florida pastor Tom Ascol, lost. As did the group’s candidates for recording secretary, president of the annual pastors’ convention and officer candidates for the SBC’s Executive Board. And most of the motions made on the floor by Conservative Baptist Network members were voted down by an overwhelming margin.

None of that discouraged Martin, a tech entrepreneur from Florida and longtime Southern Baptist.

“We’ll be back,” he said.

In recent years, the Conservative Baptist Network and its allies, including Ascol’s Florida-based Founders Ministries, a Calvinist group, and Sovereign Nations, a Christian nationalist group, have made national headlines for their claims about liberal drift in the SBC.

They’ve rallied support on social media and through conferences, urging followers to change the SBC’s direction and “take the ship” of the denomination.

One Conservative Baptist Network supporter went so far as to unfurl a skull-and-crossbones flag at his church—leading the group and its allies to be labeled as pirates.

Yet their efforts to reshape the denomination have largely failed. Last year in Nashville, Georgia pastor Mike Stone, the network-backed candidate for SBC president, lost in a close election. And a group of Conservative Baptist Network members quit the SBC’s Executive Committee in the fall, after an unsuccessful attempt to limit an investigation into how SBC leaders handled sexual abuse.

CBN had high hopes, suffered major setbacks

The week of the 2022 annual meeting began optimistically for the Conservative Baptist Network and its allies. The group drew packed crowds for an evening with California pastor John MacArthur and Voddie Baucham, a bestselling author and anti-woke preacher, and a breakfast that featured Ascol, Martin and activist Charlie Kirk of Turning Point USA.

“I think we’re going to win today,” Martin told the crowd at the breakfast, a few hours ahead of the presidential election.

But even if they did not win, he said, the stakes were too high to give up.

After the annual meeting wrapped up, Martin and other leaders blamed the group's losses mostly on location. Anaheim, Calif., he said, was "tough ground" for the network's attempts at reforming the SBC. Next year's meeting will be in New Orleans, much closer to the SBC's Bible Belt core.

"I expect the turnout to be more like Nashville," he said.

In Nashville, their candidate lost by a few hundred votes, at a gathering that drew more than 15,000 local church representatives known as messengers. By contrast, just over 8,100 messengers made it to Anaheim.

Location matters

An analysis by Eastern Illinois University professor Ryan Burge pointed out that the SBC meetings in the Bible Belt tend to outdraw those in other places. The Conservative Baptist Network also has a state chapter in Louisiana, which will likely aid with turnout.

And Southern Baptists in the Bible Belt are more likely to identify as politically conservative than those in California—which would likely bolster the Conservative Baptist Network cause, which is both religious and political.

During his remarks at the network breakfast, Kirk labeled the group's supporters as courageous pastors resisting the influence of liberalism in the evangelical church. He contrasted them with "cowardly pastors" who care only "about budgets and buildings and baptisms" and "complicit pastors" who march with Black Lives Matters and "hang pride flags."

"Our beautiful faith is under attack from within," he said.

Kirk urged pastors to stand for liberty—seeing mask mandates and COVID-

related shutdowns during the pandemic as signs of government tyranny. He also told them that if “America falls” then it will be harder for Baptists to spread the gospel.

“If we don’t recognize that we all have to agree on liberty and the gospel, we’re all going to be sharing our theological disputes in prison,” he said.

Former SBC First Vice President Lee Brand, whose term expired after the SBC meeting, told Conservative Baptist Network supporters to continue standing against worldly influences invading the denomination.

“We’re not ever going to do enough for the world to like what we have to say,” he said.

Despite their election losses, the Conservative Baptist Network and its allies have had some success. Their activism helped drive up attendance for the 2021 meeting in Nashville, the largest since the mid-1990s. And that increased attendance led SBC to move the 2023 meeting from Charlotte, N.C., to New Orleans, as the Charlotte space was too small.

‘Woke war’ continues

Anti-CRT activism by Ascol and Michael O’Fallon of Sovereign Nations also helped drive the national “woke war.” The Conservative Baptist Network and its allies played a role in a 2021 SBC resolution calling for the abolition of abortion, which would support legislation to outlaw abortion with no exceptions. A 2022 abortion resolution, also backed by the Conservative Baptist Network and its allies, which called for criminal penalties for women who have abortions, was rejected by messengers.

The network’s supporters also contributed to controversy over the future of Saddleback Church, one of the largest churches in the SBC. That church, led by bestselling author Rick Warren, ordained three women as staff

pastors last year, leading to calls for Saddleback to be expelled from the SBC. The SBC's statement of faith limits the office of pastor to men.

The SBC's credentials committee, charged with reviewing Saddleback's status, proposed creating a task force to study the meaning of the word "pastor"—given that many SBC churches refer to staff members as "pastor" even though they don't preach. The idea of a study committee was met with an angry response and was withdrawn.

Martin pointed to the credentials committee as a sign that the SBC's leadership has lost its way. Most Southern Baptists know what a pastor is, he said. While a woman can have a leadership role at a church, she can't have the title of pastor.

"I don't care if she's the women's Grand Poobah," he said. "She can't be a pastor."

Views on sex abuse controversial

While the Conservative Baptist Network and its allies have found support for their opposition to critical race theory, women pastors and abortion, some of their views on the issue of sexual abuse have been controversial.

Ascol, for example, was critical of the recent Guidepost Solutions report on abuse and has been skeptical of a series of reforms approved by SBC messengers to address abuse. Mark Coppenger, a former SBC seminary president and Conservative Baptist Network steering committee member, has said the issue of sex abuse in the denomination has been overblown. Coppenger opposed the recently passed reforms to address abuse during the annual meeting.

"I really think Guidepost and those who are enthusiastic for what they've said are virtually slandering the convention," he said in a phone interview.

“I’m saying, you’ve got us wrong.”

Coppenger fears that reforms, such as a website to track abusive pastors, will open the SBC up to lawsuits from abuse survivors.

“We should address this in the local church and work with local authorities,” he said. “But don’t go overboard.”

At the end of the 2022 meeting, Martin stood outside the main meeting hall at the Anaheim Convention Center, greeting friends, shaking hands and admiring a new “Wrath of Khan”-themed gift he got from Victor Chayasirisobhon, a fellow “Star Trek” fan and California pastor who’d been elected the SBC’s first vice president.

Martin urged friends and allies to stick with the convention, despite the group’s 2022 losses, saying the SBC is “better together.”

“We have some arguments we’ve got to settle,” he said. “But we need to go to New Orleans and settle them and do it with courage, with fidelity to Scripture.”