

Florida church signals discipline over racial prejudices

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NAPLES, Fla. (BP)—A majority white Baptist church has apologized for ‘racial prejudices’ that leaders deemed partly responsible for a favored black candidate losing the Oct. 27 vote for pastor, and said it will discipline those guilty of the sin.

The pastoral and lay leadership of First Baptist Church in Naples apologized to all Southern Baptists on Oct. 31 for “a sickness in what we characterize as a cancer within our fellowship” that led in part to 19 percent of the [congregation voting](#) against African American candidate Marcus Hayes.

The full text of the church’s letter to Southern Baptists is posted [here](#).

According to the church’s constitution and bylaws, candidates for senior pastor must receive 85 percent of the vote to win. Hayes received 81 percent after preaching in view of a call, the church said in a letter emailed to the Southern Baptist Convention Executive Committee.

“A portion of the 19 percent that voted against Marcus Hayes did so based on racial prejudices,” reads the letter signed by Executive Pastor John D. Edie on behalf of church leaders. “We know this because of the campaign that started just days before by a few disgruntled people in our church.”

Not everyone agrees

Not all members of the church believe racial prejudice swayed the vote.

“With the utmost respect, having attended FBCN for 17 years I stand on my

opinion that the color of Pastor Marcus' skin had NOTHING to do with how the vote turned out," a church member identified on Twitter as Gretchen Church tweeted [@gretchen_church](#), although she did not indicate whether she voted for Marcus Hayes.

"FBCN has been spiritually fed and nourished for over 27 years by (former) Pastor Hayes Wicker, a man of God filled with the Holy Spirit. ... How could a congregation under a man like Hayes Wicker be racist?! I think not!!!"

The church has been without a senior pastor since the spring, when Wicker's pastoral service ended.

"The issues facing FBCN are deep and systemic," @gretchen_church tweeted. "Sadly, Pastor Marcus was not given time to hear everyone out, in a comfortable place for all. Pray for FBCN that God will help them to trust each other again, cast out any ungodly spirits & reunify FBCN & allow a Pastor to lead them!"

In an email to the church membership days after the vote, leaders said a campaign against Hayes included social media, texting, phone calls and emails from ""a small group of people who call themselves 'Voices of FBCN,' and/or 'Group of Concerned FBCN Members,' as well as others who have espoused these sinful positions," but further details have not been disclosed.

Church discipline forthcoming?

Leaders assured Southern Baptists that the guilty would be disciplined in line with biblical principles.



“Let me assure you that our statement of contriteness is currently being and will continue to be followed by actions within our church to make sure that this sinful cancer is dealt with,” reads the letter signed by Executive Pastor John D. Edie on behalf of church leaders.

“Biblical church discipline has started within this local house of the Lord, and we are resolute to make sure that First Baptist Church Naples will be an example to the church at large of how Jesus Christ has asked us to go forward in this world as a light that would draw all men to Christ.”

Hayes leads the Hendersonville, N.C., campus of the multisite Biltmore Church based in Arden, N.C., and is a member of the SBC Executive Committee. He has made no comments to Baptist Press regarding the vote.

The 85 percent threshold for victory is exceedingly high, the church acknowledged, but said the congregational vote after the “in view of a call” sermon is usually a procedural affirmation.

“Our Pastoral Search Committee, lay leadership, and the Pastoral Staff all anticipated that our vote would be nothing less than an affirmative statement from our people that God had sovereignly chosen for Marcus

Hayes to be our next Pastor,” the letter reads.

“Sadly that did not come to fruition. If all things had been fair and equal, our story would not have reached as far and wide, and stoked the emotions that it has. But what was concluded was all things were not fair and right.”

First Baptist Church in Naples lists 10,596 members on the 2018 SBC Annual Church Profile, with an average attendance of 3,233. On voting day, the church noted a “record” turnout of 3,818. Of 1,917 votes cast, 365 were negative. An 85 percent victory allowed no more than 288 negative votes.

In the above referenced email to the congregation, church leaders vowed to move forward in choosing a new senior pastor.

“Please know this, that our Senior Pastor Search Team will meet to identify options moving forward with our Senior Pastor search,” the leaders said. “For now, we humbly ask you to stay strong in the Lord. ... Pray with us and lock arms with us as we move forward and seek the face of God.”