

# National Baptists' new president seeks to be inclusive

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BIRMINGHAM, Ala. (RNS)—Boise Kimber officially was installed as president of the National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc., during the midwinter board meeting of the predominantly Black denomination—which he hopes will become more inclusive of women and young leaders.



A marker memorializes Addie Mae Collins, Cynthia Wesley, Carole Robertson and Carol Denise McNair—four girls who were killed by white supremacists in the terrorist bombing of 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham on Sept. 15, 1963. (Photo / Ken Camp)

National Baptists and guests filled the 2,000-seat sanctuary of the historic Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Ala., for a three-hour service Jan. 13. About 500 people planned to attend a sold-out inauguration ball on Tuesday.

Kimber, pastor of First Calvary Baptist Church in New Haven, Conn., was greeted by officers of other Black Christian organizations, including the Lott Carey Foreign Mission Convention, the Conference of National Black Churches and Full Gospel Baptist Fellowship.

He was installed into his new role by his predecessor, Jerry Young, who reminded Kimber of the importance of having a strong spiritual life as a leader.

“You can’t lead Black Baptists without orders from Jehovah,” Young, who concluded two five-year terms, advised his successor. “That’s all I got to say. Just spend your time with God.”

The installation service was held in the church that was bombed by members of the Ku Klux Klan more than 60 years ago, resulting in the deaths of four girls readying for a Sunday church service. Kimber, 65, also chose the church as the location for his 2023 announcement to run for the top role of his denomination.

## **Kimber outlines goals**

“My main goal now is, one, to restore our headquarters in Nashville, Tenn.; two, to focus on Christian education, which our convention was founded upon,” Kimber, the former president of the Connecticut State Missionary Baptist Convention, said in an interview hours before his installation.

“Three is to have a better and a greater relationship with our young people of our convention; four is to have women to become a part of the administrative parts of our convention.”

National Baptists gathered at the Birmingham Jefferson Convention Complex for sessions to handle denominational business and participate in worship services and planned to conclude the gatherings Jan. 16 with a

mental health workshop on “trauma-informed ministry.”

Kimber was elected in September in a contentious election process, where he was the sole candidate on the ballot after officials determined the Connecticut pastor had received the necessary 100 endorsements from member churches and other National Baptist entities to qualify to run for president.

He won 69 percent of the vote at the National Baptist Convention, USA, annual session in Baltimore, with 31 percent voting “no.”

Alvin Love, a Chicago-area pastor and one of the four other ministers who had wanted to be on the ballot, said his concern was with the election process and not Kimber.

“He’s a good guy. I have no issue with him,” said Love, joining others in welcoming Kimber’s emphasis on including younger and newer pastors and women leaders in positions in his administration.

“I don’t know if it’s moving as fast as it should or is going as high as it ought,” said Love, who would have liked to see a woman named vice president. “But he’s doing much more than anybody before him ever did in that area.”

## **‘We’re making progress’ regarding women in leadership**

Asked about the lack of female vice presidents in the National Baptist Convention, USA, Kimber responded in the interview: “We will get to that. We’re making steps. We’re making progress, and so we will continue to work towards that goal.”

Michael Charles Durant, 64, the new chairman of the convention’s board of

directors, said there has been an expansion in women's leadership roles.

"In the past, there were areas of concentration, say in Christian ed, the women's auxiliary, missions, but this will be far broader," he said.

During the installation service, Valerie Thompson, pastor of a Columbus, Ga., church and a new member of the National Baptist Convention, USA, Executive Committee, said a prayer.

Nicole Guns, one of several people appointed as assistant secretaries, introduced the convention's officers as they processed into the church. Shevalle T. Kimber, co-pastor of First Calvary Baptist Church in New Haven, sat next to her husband, the new president, not far from the pulpit where speakers took turns congratulating him during the installation service.

Guns, 43, said in an earlier interview she was enthusiastic about being part of Kimber's cabinet, along with other millennials.

"In the Black Baptist church you can be 60 years old and considered young," said Guns, who was one of the preachers at a young adult revival held on Sunday at the Birmingham church.

## **Be 'intentional about creating space' for young leaders**

Christopher Davis, the new convention general secretary, said under Kimber's leadership there are deliberate efforts to give younger clergy spaces to preach on the main stage of National Baptist meetings or teach in its workshops and classes.

"In a few years, they will ultimately transition into leadership as some of those of us who have been around for a while begin to age out," said Davis,

52. “If you’re not intentional about creating space for them, then what incentive do they have to stay? And if they all leave, then there’s no one to lead the work after we’ve passed off the scene.”

Beyond choosing people for his administration and convention committees, Kimber issued a statement marking the death of former President Jimmy Carter, whom he cited as an example of “living one’s faith through action.”

He also announced the convention would send “10 truckloads of supplies to aid in the recovery efforts, a small but meaningful step to bring comfort and support to those in need” after the wildfires in California.

## **Talk about diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives**

On the day of the installation, Kimber announced that he had created an economic development committee to meet with politicians and major corporations that have been rolling back their initiatives to address diversity, equity and inclusion.

“Many of our people buy from Walmart, Target, McDonald’s, and so those people certainly would have to come to the table to talk about the diversity and talk about the inclusion of Blacks in their business,” he said in the interview.

The committee will be led by Chicago philanthropist and businessman Willie Wilson, who began at McDonald’s as a custodian and later became a franchisee of the fast food restaurant.

Kimber signed a memorandum of understanding with Gamaliel National Network to support the National Baptists’ work on social justice.

Kimber said he was pleased to see the range of people in the halls of the

convention center as the midwinter gathering began its four-day series of meetings on Monday.

He said the denomination is still recovering from the heights of the COVID-19 pandemic, which “really hurt the American fiber of business and religious institutions,” leading to losses in membership.

“We are rebuilding what we’ve lost and bringing people back to our denomination and to our local churches,” he said, as he headed to his next meeting.

“A lot of young people and pastors are here, and so we’re excited. A lot of women are here. A lot of seniors are here. There’s a variety of people here at our board meetings.”