

New Orleans pastor may become first African-American SBC president

February 7, 2012

NEW ORLEANS (RNS)—After months of urging from other Baptists around the country, Fred Luter told his African-American congregation he will seek to become the first black man to lead the predominantly white [Southern Baptist Convention](#).

Several Baptist leaders said Luter becomes the prohibitive favorite for the post, to be filled in a potentially historic election at the Southern Baptists' annual meeting in June.



Fred Luter Jr. of New Orleans is the highest ranking African-American in the Southern Baptist Convention and is widely seen as the denomination's next president. (RNS file photo by Ric Francis/*The Times-Picayune*)

The SBC presidency will become vacant when Bryant Wright of Marietta, Ga., finishes his second one-year term.

Many began openly promoting Luter for the top job last summer, moments after he was elected the convention's first African-American first vice president.

"If he runs, he'll get elected overwhelmingly. He may be unopposed," said Daniel Akin, president of Southeastern Baptist Seminary in Wake Forest, N.C.

No other candidates have announced so far. Other potential candidates were judging their chances on whether Luter decided to run, Akin said.

"I'd be very surprised if there were any other substantial candidates," said Russell Moore of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky.

Akin, Moore and others say they are eager to elect Luter, both for his leadership gifts and to demonstrate Southern Baptist acceptance of the changing face of their work.

Luter's church once was a predominantly white Southern Baptist congregation dying on the vine after its neighborhood became increasingly black in the 1970s. Luter, a black street-corner preacher with no previous pastoral experience, became pastor of [Franklin Avenue Baptist Church](#) in New Orleans in 1986. The church kept its Southern Baptist affiliation while Luter built it into a major success as a predominantly African-American congregation, and then he led his church in rebuilding after Hurricane Katrina.

Several Baptist congregations around the country tried to recruit Luter as a pastor or co-pastor, Akin said, believing he might be available after Katrina. "He was like Peyton Manning as a free agent."

Luter's stature grew in his decision to remain in New Orleans, Akin added. "You have to have unbelievable respect for a man who made that kind of commitment," he said. "Look at what he did."

Growth in traditional white congregations in the 16-million-member Southern Baptist Convention has plateaued. In recent years the denomination has actively sought to reach out to nonwhites, typically Hispanics, African-Americans and Asians. In 1990, 95 percent of Southern Baptist congregations were white; now the figure is 80 percent, said Scott McConnell of LifeWay Research, a church-related institute.

"Some critic said of us that the Southern Baptist Convention is as white as a tractor pull," Moore said. "If that remains the case, the Southern Baptist Convention has no future. I think Fred Luter's election will be pioneering; I pray it will not be an anomaly."

Meeting in Phoenix last summer, Southern Baptists adopted a plan requiring its organizations to nourish minority leadership for the future. That's a turnabout for a convention that was formed in 1845 by Southern slaveholding Baptists who broke away from anti-slavery Baptists in the North.

For much of the 20th century, many Southern Baptist pastors and rank-and-file church members across the South supported white supremacy and resisted the civil rights movement. But in 1995, the convention formally apologized for its past and committed itself to racial reconciliation.

"We need to live up to what we said in 1995," said David Dockery, president of Union University in Jackson, Tenn. "This would be a positive step, but only a first one."