

SBC affirms ouster of churches with female pastors

June 14, 2023

Messengers to the Southern Baptist Convention annual meeting voted overwhelmingly to affirm the expulsion of three churches—two congregations that allow women to serve as pastors and one church that allegedly tolerated sexual abuse by a minister.

By a wide margin, messengers to the SBC annual meeting in New Orleans affirmed an Executive Committee decision to find Fern Creek Baptist Church in Louisville, Ky., Saddleback Church in Southern California and Freedom Church in Vero Beach, Fla., outside the bounds of “friendly cooperation” with the SBC.



Screen capture image

Messengers from Southern Baptist churches voted on Tuesday afternoon, June 13, and results were announced Wednesday morning, June 14.

They voted 9,700 to 806 (91.85 percent) to affirm the ouster of Fern Creek Baptist Church; 9,437 to 1,212 (88.46 percent) to support the decision to expel Saddleback Church; and 9,984 to 343 (96.46 percent) to ratify the expulsion of Freedom Church.

Churches appealed Executive Committee decision

The three congregations appealed the Executive Committee action. In each case, a church representative had three minutes to make a case for reinstatement prior to a vote by messengers.



Linda Popham has been pastor of Fern Creek Baptist Church in Louisville, Ky., more than 30 years.
(Photo by Sonya Singh)

Linda Popham has served Fern Creek Baptist Church 40 years, including the last three decades as senior pastor. She described herself as “more conservative than most Southern Baptist pastors.”

“We believe that the Bible allows women to serve in ways in which all of you do not agree,” Popham told messengers during the business session prior to the vote. “But we should still be able to partner together.”

Rick Warren, retired founding pastor of Saddleback Church, urged messengers to “act like Southern Baptists and agree to disagree” on the

single issue of whether a woman can serve in the office of pastor.

Historically, Warren said, Southern Baptists have agreed to disagree on some doctrinal issues for the sake of a shared mission.

Churches should be disfellowshipped by the SBC for “sins that harm the testimony of our convention,” Warren said, but churches that call women to serve as pastors “have not sinned.”

He noted the SBC Constitution says cooperating churches “closely identify” with the Baptist Faith & Message, not “completely agree.” Saddleback Church disagrees with “one word” in the statement of faith, he said.

“Isn’t that close enough?” he asked.

Mohler defended decision to exclude churches



Al Mohler said the Southern Baptist Convention is within its rights to remove Fern Creek and Saddleback because it “has the sole responsibility to establish its own membership and to define what it

means to be a cooperative Southern Baptist church.” (Photo by Sonya Singh)

In both cases, the Executive Committee called on Al Mohler, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, to speak in support of the decision to exclude the two congregations with women in pastoral roles.

“The congregations of the Southern Baptist Convention are autonomous, and we do not seek to invade the autonomy of any local church,” Mohler said. “At the same time, this convention has the sole responsibility to establish its own membership and to define what it means to be a cooperative Southern Baptist church.”

The issue, Mohler said, is maintaining doctrine and order. He insisted the issue of women in the pastorate is grounded in the doctrine of biblical authority. Furthermore, he said, a shared commitment to a male-only pastorate has resulted in a unified convention.

“The issue of a woman serving in the pastorate is an issue of fundamental biblical authority that does violate both the doctrine and the order of the Southern Baptist Convention,” Mohler asserted.

Warren ‘wasn’t expecting to win’

“I wasn’t expecting to win,” Warren told reporters in a news conference soon after the vote results were announced. “I wanted to push a conversation that had stagnated.”



Rick Warren responds to reporters' questions after messengers to the Southern Baptist Convention affirmed a decision to expel Saddleback Church, which he founded. (Screen capture image)

In the first century, all followers of Jesus—male and female—were involved in proclaiming the gospel and making disciples, he said.

"The church at its best was the church at its birth," Warren said.

The priesthood of all believers means all followers of Christ are empowered for ministry, he said.

"In the New Testament, everybody gets to play," Warren said.

Warren expressed surprise that more than 1,200 voted against affirming the Executive Committee decision to exclude Saddleback, given the composition of the SBC annual meeting.

He characterized those who attend the convention primarily as denominational workers, retirees who want a reunion with old friends, local Baptists from the area where a meeting is held and "activists" from small churches who are looking for a platform.

"The face of Southern Baptists does not look at all like the annual meeting," he said.

A majority of messengers to the 2023 annual meeting chose “conformity and uniformity rather than unity,” Warren said.

Warren emphasized his belief in “historic Baptist principles,” noting, “Baptists are famous for dissent.”

“You have to do what’s right, even if you shake the boat,” he said.

“We made the effort knowing we weren’t going to win,” Warren said.

However, he voiced belief Saddleback’s view on women in ministry eventually will prevail.

“Truth inevitably wins out over tradition. ... Change will happen,” he said.

Church excluded over handling of abuse allegations

Messengers to the SBC annual meeting also heard discussion regarding the decision to deem Freedom Church not to be in “friendly cooperation” with the SBC, because the church failed to cooperate to resolve concerns regarding an abuse allegation.

Donald Stewart, a representative from the congregation said the pastor who was the subject of the allegations resigned May 22, and an independent party—the Anglican Church of North America—investigated and resolved the concerns.

Executive Committee member and Florida pastor Dean Inserra noted Freedom Church was disfellowshipped both by Treasure Coast Baptist Association and the Florida Baptist Convention.

He also said the congregation “took zero action” and failed to respond to the SBC Credentials Committee or the Executive Committee until after the

decision to oust the church was reached.