

SBC amends Baptist Faith & Message, OKs task force

June 16, 2023

In a highly unusual move, messengers to the Southern Baptist Convention annual meeting amended the 2000 Baptist Faith & Message statement on pastors in response to a motion offered from the convention floor.

During a meeting dominated by debate about female pastors and which churches can be considered Southern Baptist, messengers also voted to approve a task force to study how the convention should regard churches as “in friendly cooperation.”

Jared Cornutt, pastor of North Shelby Baptist Church in Birmingham, Ala., introduced the motion to amend the 2000 Baptist Faith & Message to change language in an article on the church from “pastor” to “pastor/elder/overseer.”

“We should never take lightly the prospect of amending our statement of faith,” Cornutt said.

However, he asserted, “I believe we have unintentionally found ourselves with a lack of clarity that can be remedied by a small and nonsubstantive change.”

The amended article regarding the church states: “Its two scriptural offices are that of pastor/elder/overseer and deacon. While both men and women are gifted for service in the church, the office of pastor/elder/overseer is limited to men as qualified by Scripture.”

The revised language is consistent with a resolution the convention adopted that stated “the only officers of the local church that the New

Testament recognizes are that of deacon and of bishop/elder/pastor.”

Left unresolved is the modern practice—followed both by some megachurches and by Baptists who strictly adhere to the Reformed tradition—of having what some refer to as a “plurality of elders.” Some of those churches distinguish between “teaching elders” and “ruling elders” or “governing elders.”

Study ‘friendly cooperation’ determination

Debate at the annual meeting centered on whether churches with female pastors can be considered “in friendly cooperation” with the SBC. Messengers voted to affirm the ouster of Saddleback Church, a California megachurch with a male senior pastor, because it has women on staff who carry the title “pastor.”

James Merritt, a former SBC president and pastor of Cross Pointe Church in Duluth, Ga., made a motion to authorize the convention’s president to appoint a “broadly representative” task force to study how the convention should determine if churches are “in friendly cooperation on questions of faith and practice.”

Merritt’s motion called on the task force to bring its recommendations to the 2024 SBC annual meeting regarding how the convention “can move forward together in biblical fidelity, missional clarity, and cooperative unity.”

Four other past presidents of the SBC—Ed Litton, J.D. Greear, Steve Gaines and Bryant Wright—stood with Merritt as he made the motion.

Messengers rejected an amendment that would have dictated the composition of the task force, including stipulating that Al Mohler,

president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, chair the group.

The convention also approved the appointment of a task force to study the impact of the Great Commission Resurgence recommendations adopted by the 2009 annual meeting.

Randy Chestnutt of Woodland Hills Baptist Church in Dayton, Ohio, made the motion to empower the convention president to appoint the task force. The group is to what influence recommendations from the Great Commission Resurgence report had on the effectiveness of SBC efforts to evangelize North America and on relationships between SBC ministry partners.

Some matters of accountability referred

Several motions on financial accountability were referred to the Executive Committee:

- Rhett Burns from First Baptist Church in Travelers Rest, S.C., made a motion to require SBC entities to submit information found in IRS Form 990 to the convention.
- David Norman from University Baptist Church in San Antonio made a motion to amend the SBC Business and Financial Plan for printing reports in the Book of Reports and include information required by IRS Form 990.
- Thomas Beckwith from New Beginnings Church in Boone, N.C., requested the Executive Committee study its financial practices.
- Ben Bowden from First Baptist Church in Enterprise, Ala., asked the Executive Committee to study whether any executive staff member should serve as SBC treasurer.

Based in part on information provided in a report by Erin Roach of Baptist Press.