

SBC ousts Saddleback Church over female pastor

February 22, 2023

NASHVILLE (RNS)—Subject to appeal, Saddleback Church, the megachurch long led by Rick Warren, has been ousted from the Southern Baptist Convention for naming a woman to its pastoral team, against SBC teaching.



Rick Warren (second from left) with (left to right) Stacie Wood, Andy Wood and Kay Warren. (Photo courtesy of A. Larry Ross)

The Southern Baptist Convention’s Executive Committee decided Feb. 21 to approve the recommendation from the denomination’s credentials committee that the Lake Forest, Calif., church “be deemed not in friendly cooperation with the Convention, on the basis that the church has a faith and practice that does not closely identify with the Convention’s adopted statement of faith, as demonstrated by the church having a female teaching pastor functioning in the office of pastor.”

Andy Wood replaced Warren as lead pastor last summer. His wife, Stacie

Wood, has the title of “teaching pastor.”

Saddleback was one of five churches that were declared to no longer be in friendly cooperation because of a woman having a pastoral role. One church, Freedom Church in Vero Beach, Fla., was ousted “based on a lack of intent to cooperate in resolving concerns regarding a sexual abuse allegation,” the Executive Committee stated.

Executive Committee member Mike Keahbone tweeted that any of the churches that were ousted Tuesday have the option of appealing to the messengers, or delegates, in attendance at the SBC’s next annual meeting, scheduled for June in New Orleans.

“Saddleback now has the option to appeal, which appears likely,” tweeted Keahbone, an Oklahoma pastor.



“As Western culture grows more dark, more evil and more secular, we have to decide are we going to treat each other as allies or adversaries?” Pastor Rick Warren asked messengers to the 2022 SBC annual meeting in Anaheim, Calif. “Are we going to keep bickering over secondary issues or are we going to keep the main thing the

main thing?” (BP Photo by Adam Covington)

Warren, Saddleback’s founding pastor, made a surprise visit to the 2022 SBC annual meeting and urged Southern Baptists to overcome their differences and continue to cooperate.

“I love Southern Baptists,” the bestselling author said at the time. “As Western culture becomes more dark, more evil, more secular, we have to decide: Are we going to treat each other as allies or not?”

Warren declined to comment on Tuesday about the Executive Committee decision, his spokesperson A. Larry Ross said.

Saddleback’s elders issued a statement late Tuesday that echoed Warren’s earlier comments.

“We love and have always valued our relationship with the SBC and its faithful churches,” they said. “We will engage and respond through the proper channels at the appropriate time in hopes to serve other like-minded Bible believing SBC churches. Meanwhile, we remain focused on following God’s leadership to love and serve our church family and the communities around our campuses.”

Saddleback’s support of women leaders was under scrutiny before the Woods’ arrival. On Mother’s Day weekend in 2021, the church ordained three women who were longtime staffers, drawing criticism from prominent Southern Baptist leaders and praise from supporters of women in ministry.

At the SBC annual meeting a month later, a delegate called on the SBC to “break fellowship with Saddleback Baptist Church, as they have ordained three ladies as pastors, and all other churches that would choose to follow this path.”

That request prompted an investigation by the credentials committee.

Andy Wood also was the subject of a separate inquiry ordered by Saddleback after allegations surfaced of him being an abusive leader at his previous church. In July, the megachurch's elders announced after investigations by two firms that they determined "there is no systemic or pattern of abuse under Andy's leadership, nor was there an individual that we felt was abused."

The other churches that were cited by the credentials committee for having women in pastoral roles were: New Faith Mission Ministry, Griffin, Ga.; St. Timothy's Christian Baptist, Baltimore, Md.; Calvary Baptist Church, Jackson, Miss.; and Fern Creek Baptist Church, Louisville, Ky.

EDITOR'S NOTE: This article—originally posted Feb. 22—was updated Feb. 23 to include the statement from the Saddleback Church elders.