

# Southern Baptists' long disagreement about women

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In May 1877, Myra Graves made history.

Widow of the first president of Baylor University, Graves was the first woman [seated](#) as a delegate to the Southern Baptist Convention's annual meeting. She returned again in 1882, [according to](#) the Journal of Southern Religion.

No one seemed to notice.

The same could not be said a few years later, when two women from Arkansas showed up as delegates. A pastor from Virginia stood up, saying women had no right to be at the meeting. That led to a hasty gathering of a five-member committee to decide the issue. The committee did not want the women there, but ruled nothing in the denomination's constitution barred their presence.

The committee's ruling did not sit well with delegates like a certain Dr. Hawthorne of Georgia.

"I love the ladies, but I dread them worse," he told delegates, according to the May 16, 1885, edition of the Tennessee Baptist newspaper. "If my wife was here knocking at the door of this Convention I'd never vote against her coming in."

Delegates to that meeting eventually voted to bar the Arkansas women. Then they changed the SBC's constitution to make it plain only "brethren" were allowed—a rule that stayed in place for decades.

# Role of women revisited

Nearly 140 years later, the role of women in the SBC is back up for debate. This time, the question is whether churches with women pastors should be expelled from the nation's largest Protestant denomination.

Since 2000, official Southern Baptist doctrine limits the role of pastor to men. But that doctrine had never been enforced at the national level until recently. This past February, the SBC's Executive Committee expelled five churches—including Saddleback in California, one of the largest churches in the SBC—for having women pastors.

Several of those churches are expected to appeal at the SBC's annual meeting in June.

The Rev. Linda Barnes Popham, longtime pastor of Fern Creek Baptist Church in Louisville, Ky., one of the churches kicked out alongside Saddleback, [told](#) *The Tennessean* newspaper she was surprised her role at the church became controversial recently. She said a number of SBC leaders have preached at the church during her three decades as pastor, including the chair of the committee that recommended disfellowshipping Fern Creek.

"If our convention continues to make 'minor things' the 'main thing,' there will soon not be many churches left in the convention," she told that committee in a letter last October, according to *The Tennessean*.

Saddleback pastor Andy Young also [released](#) a video this week outlining the church's view on women leaders.

The current SBC debate over women pastors has been fueled, at least in part, by a 2019 [tweet](#) from bestselling author and Bible teacher Beth Moore about speaking at a church on Mother's Day. Her social media post sparked

a wave of controversy that eventually contributed to her leaving the denomination.

At the time, the SBC also was dealing with a major crisis over sexual abuse and some felt the alarm bell over women preachers was being used to distract from that crisis. The news of Saddleback's expulsion likewise has overshadowed decisions around [paying for](#) abuse reforms.

## Opposition to women pastors and preachers

Delegates to the June meeting, known as messengers, may also debate a potential constitutional amendment to officially bar churches that "affirm, appoint, or employ a woman as a pastor of any kind."

Virginia Baptist pastor Mike Law proposed the constitutional amendment last year, but the SBC Executive Committee has yet to decide whether to let it move forward. Any changes to the SBC's constitution would have to be passed two years in a row.

Law, pastor of Arlington Baptist Church, said several SBC churches close to his congregation have women pastors. That [prompted](#) him to write to the Executive Committee last May, seeking clarification about the SBC's rules.

His email also had a personal side. Arlington Baptist Church, where Law began serving in 2014, had at least two women pastors in its past. Having women as pastors, he believed, put the church at odds with the SBC's doctrine.

"Thankfully, the saints at Arlington Baptist have returned to faithfulness on this issue, and unity with Southern Baptists," Law [wrote](#) in his proposed amendment. Law, who was not available for an interview because he was assisting a church member, has also [set up](#) a website for the proposed

amendment, [including a video](#) explaining his [rationale](#).

“Why is it wrong for women to serve as pastors?” Law said in the video, which was sent to members of the Executive Committee. “Because it is contrary to God’s design for his church. It is that simple. Don’t overthink this issue.”

Law also put together a [list](#) of 170 women pastors serving at SBC churches. That list includes 51 women who are senior pastors, 20 associate pastors, 47 children’s pastors, 12 elders, 11 worship pastors and 35 “other” pastors.

## Acts Church in Waco

David Booker, lead pastor of Acts Church in Waco, was not aware until recently that his church was on Law’s list. But he was not surprised.

He and his wife, Kim, the church’s co-lead pastor, founded the church in 2007. The church, which is affiliated with the Baptist General Convention of Texas and the SBC, also has a worship pastor, a children’s pastor and an executive pastor who are all women.

Booker said men who hold those roles often are called pastors, and so the church just uses the same titles for the women in those roles. The church also has several women elders, a position some churches limit to men.

“I don’t know if God is that concerned about titles,” he said.

One of the current debates in the SBC is whether the denomination’s doctrinal requirement of male pastors applies only to senior pastors or to any pastoral role.

When the church was first founded, Booker said, he and his his wife—who runs a discipleship school for the church but does not preach on Sundays—and other leaders studied biblical passages about the roles of

men and women. As Baptists, they wanted to do everything according to the Bible.

“We came to the conclusion that the Bible does not prohibit women in church leadership,” he said. “I can totally get how people feel different.”

According to the current SBC constitution and bylaws, a church must have a “faith and practice which closely identifies with the Convention’s adopted statement of faith.”

Booker said Acts church fits that description. The church is committed to the Bible and to what’s known as the Great Commission, Jesus’ command to make disciples around the world.

## **Shared beliefs expected**

David Schrock, pastor of preaching at Occoquan Bible Church in Virginia, which joined the SBC, said having a shared set of beliefs makes it possible for churches in the convention to work together on missions and starting new churches. Without those shared beliefs, he said, that cooperation falls apart.

Schrock, who said Law is a friend, supports the amendment.

“If we cannot agree on who a pastor can be, when Scripture clearly speaks to the matter, we cannot cooperate in planting churches,” said Schrock.

Several pastors on Law’s list declined to comment or said their church was no longer affiliated with the SBC. One did say her church stopped giving to the SBC a number of years ago—though some congregation members still give directly to SBC missions.

Law is not the first to propose an amendment to bar churches with women pastors. [In 1993](#), a messenger named Michael Barley from Kentucky

proposed an amendment to bar “churches which have ordained women.” The Executive Committee rejected that amendment the following year.

Things have changed since then, said Law. In 2000, the denomination’s official doctrinal statement, known as the Baptist Faith & Message, was revised to state “the office of pastor is limited to men as qualified by Scripture.”

“With the confessional basis for this amendment now in place, it is time the SBC took this step,” he said.