

Why is the SBC still arguing about women pastors?

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(RNS)—The Southern Baptist Convention’s credentials committee had a problem.

It had been asked to determine whether to expel one of the denomination’s largest churches for violating the SBC’s ban on women serving as pastors.

But the committee could not agree on what the word “pastor” meant in a rule that said only men can be pastors. Did it refer to the church’s senior pastor? Or did it mean any role with the title of pastor—such as a music pastor, youth pastor or children’s pastor?

The committee asked the messengers to the denomination’s 2022 annual meeting for help. What the committee got was an earful instead.

“If we eventually have to form a study committee over every word in our confession of faith, then we’re doomed, and we’re no longer a confessional people,” Al Mohler, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, told the meeting, adding Southern Baptists know exactly what a pastor is.

Nearly three years—and [a failed constitutional amendment](#)—later, confusion remains about how the ban on women pastors should be applied.

Continued confusion

In mid-February, the SBC’s Executive Committee voted to expel a church in Alaska after its pastor signed a letter saying Jesus did not put limits on the roles women could play in ministry.

But the credentials committee, which makes recommendations to the

Executive Committee on such issues, deemed a South Carolina megachurch, which has a woman teaching pastor who preaches regularly, remained in “friendly cooperation” with the SBC.

That did not please Clint Pressley, the SBC’s current president.

“My understanding is that our credentials committee deemed a church in friendly cooperation that has a female teaching pastor,” Pressley, a North Carolina pastor, wrote on X, formerly known as Twitter.

“The committee needs to take another look at this one. Our statement of faith is clear about qualifications for a pastor.”

Things changed after church leaders signed a letter



Pastor Mark
Goodman.
(Courtesy photo
via RNS)

Mark Goodman, pastor of Rabbit Creek Church in Anchorage, Alaska, said he was saddened to no longer be part of the SBC, after spending his whole

life in the denomination.

“I jokingly say I’ve been a Baptist longer than I’ve been a Christian, because my parents took me to a Baptist church while I was still in the womb,” Goodman said in a recent interview.

Goodman said the church had first heard from the credentials committee last year, after someone complained about Lori Pepiton, the congregation’s longtime pastor to children and families.

After exchanging emails, the committee closed its inquiry, having found no conflicts with the SBC’s beliefs.

“Again, thank you for your cooperation and for the information you provided,” the committee wrote in an email dated Oct. 24.

“We value the partnership of Rabbit Creek Church with the Southern Baptist Convention and pray for your continued ministry.”

Things changed when Goodman and other leaders at the church [signed a letter](#) in March which argued for no limits on the roles women can hold.

Signing that letter went too far, the credentials committee decided, as it gave public support to beliefs that contradicted SBC teaching.

Goodman said that in signing that letter, he was speaking for himself, not the congregation. Not everyone in the church holds the same beliefs, and the church has not taken an official stand on the issue.

The SBC holds complementarian beliefs—the idea that women and men have different roles to play in marriages and in churches. Churches that allow women pastors are often referred to as egalitarian.

Among the members at Rabbit Creek is Randy Covington, the leader of Alaska Baptist Resource Network, the state convention for SBC churches in

Alaska.

He told Baptist Press there was no conflict between Rabbit Creek's beliefs and the SBC.

'Feels like kind of a witch hunt'



Rabbit Creek Church in Anchorage, Alaska.
(Image courtesy Google Maps via RNS)

"They do not have egalitarian views," Covington said. "Their positive impact on the community of Anchorage cannot be overlooked."

Meredith Stone, executive director of Waco-based Baptist Women in Ministry, said the removal of Rabbit Creek Church was disappointing. She found it odd the church essentially was being punished because its pastor signed a letter.

"It feels like kind of a witch hunt," she said.

Stone also wonders whether SBC pastors—and not just churches—are being put on notice any disagreement with the SBC statement of faith on the issue of women in ministry will not be tolerated.

That's not how the SBC handles other issues, such as baptism or who can take Communion. The SBC statement of faith says only those who have been baptized by immersion can take part in Communion.

"But they're not kicking churches out because someone who was sprinkled for their baptism took Communion," she said.

Inconsistent application alleged

NewSpring Church, a megachurch in South Carolina where Meredith Knox [serves as a teaching pastor](#) and preaches regularly, remains in friendly cooperation with the SBC. That decision has led to [public criticism](#) of the credentials committee.

Suzanne Swift, the risk and legal services director for NewSpring, said in an email only men can be lead pastor or elders at the church, but women are allowed to be leaders and to preach.

"We recognize a biblical distinction between the office of elder/overseer—reserved for qualified men—and the shepherding and leadership responsibilities that both men and women may carry," Swift said.

"The term 'pastor' at NewSpring refers to shepherding care rather than the formal office of elder. While women are not ordained as elders, they play an essential role in pastoral care, leadership, and teaching, all under the biblical framework of male eldership."

A media representative for the SBC's Executive Committee referred RNS to the credentials committee for comment, which did not immediately respond to that request.

At the SBC annual meeting in 2024, messengers failed to confirm a proposed change, known as the Law Amendment, that only would have

allowed churches that have “only men as any kind of pastor or elder as qualified by Scripture” to be part of the SBC.

The amendment to the SBC constitution passed by a two-thirds majority in 2023 but fell short of that mark in 2024 during a required second vote—meaning it failed.

‘Inconsistency is pretty glaring to me’

The credentials committee decision on NewSpring baffled [Jared Cornutt](#), pastor of North Shelby Baptist Church in Birmingham, Ala.

In an interview, Cornutt said a past credentials committee had recommended the Executive Committee expel Saddleback Church for having a woman teaching pastor. So why not NewSpring?

“This is exactly like Saddleback,” he said. “The inconsistency is pretty glaring to me.”

Cornutt, who backed a [successful 2023 change](#) to the SBC’s statement of faith meant to clarify the definition of pastor, said some churches are using the word in a way that’s not “biblically permissible.”

“There is no difference between a senior pastor, associate pastor or children’s pastor,” he said. “If you have the title pastor, then you have the office of pastor.”

The easiest solution, said Cornutt, is for churches to change the titles they use. Rather than calling someone a children’s pastor, call them a children’s ministry director, he said. The title of pastor should be limited to men who preach or have authority in the church.

He said one reason the Law Amendment failed is a system already was in place to deal with churches that have women pastors. Now that system has

failed.

He predicts the Law Amendment—named for Virginia pastor Mike Law, who proposed it—or something like it will be reintroduced this year.

“I can’t see how it won’t pass,” he said.

The belief that only men can be pastors was added to the SBC’s statement of faith in 2000.

Impact of social media

But no churches were removed on a national level for violating that until 2023, when the Executive Committee [voted out Saddleback](#).

That’s for a number of reasons, said Griffin Gullledge, pastor of Fayetteville First Baptist Church, about 45 minutes south of Atlanta.



A Saddleback Church Facebook post about ordaining three women in May 2021. (Screen grab via Saddleback and RNS)

Until the advent of social media, he said, most Southern Baptists had no idea who was serving on the staff of other churches. So even if a church like Saddleback ordained a woman as pastor, few people would know.

“How many Southern Baptists 10 years ago could name a single staff member at Saddleback apart from Rick Warren?” said Gullledge, referring to Saddleback’s legendary pastor, who retired from the church in 2022.

By contrast, Saddleback announced the ordination of three women staffers as pastors on the church Facebook page in 2021—setting off a denomination-wide debate.

The debate intensified after the church named Stacie Wood, wife of Andy Wood, who succeeded Warren, as a teaching pastor.

He also said that for pragmatic reasons, churches have for years used the term “pastor” incorrectly applying it to a wide variety of roles.

He said Southern Baptists agree on what a pastor is. But they have not always been consistent in how they use the word.

Changing that will be complicated, Gullledge said. Some would prefer churches just change titles for staffers, while others want a more top-down approach along the lines of a Law Amendment.

He does not see much widescale support for women pastors.

“There is zero chance that what the future holds for the Southern Baptist Convention is a consensus that allows for women pastors,” he said.

Goodman worries that the more the SBC draws hard lines, the more it will shrink.

“They keep narrowing the understanding of what it means to be a Southern Baptist church,” the Alaska pastor said.