

In Nashville, an eventful annual meeting for Southern Baptists

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Ed Litton (center) participates in a panel during the Southern Baptist Convention annual meeting on June 15 in Nashville. (RNS photo by Kit Doyle)

More than 15,000 Southern Baptist Convention leaders and pastors gathered in Nashville, Tennessee, June 15–16 for the first annual meeting of the nation’s largest Protestant denomination since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The months leading up to the event were filled with tension. Public divisions over issues of race and gender were exacerbated by two high-profile exits from the denomination: popular author and teacher Beth Moore in March and Russell Moore, who led the denomination’s public policy arm for eight years, in May. A letter penned by Moore and leaked to the press in late May blasted the SBC for its explicit racism and its failure to address sexual abuse within its affiliated churches.

For many participants and observers, the 2021 annual SBC meeting served as a bellwether for the future of a denomination seemingly at war with itself. Here are some of the highlights from the event.

An upset in the SBC presidential race

In a hotly contested election decided by just over 500 votes, Alabama pastor Ed Litton was elected president of the SBC.

Litton, the longtime pastor of Redemption Church in Saraland, Alabama, a congregation with 3,900 members, was considered a long shot in the race. Two other candidates—Georgia pastor Mike Stone, a leader among conservative critics of current SBC leaders, and Southern Baptist Theological Seminary president Al Mohler—had been considered the favorites.

Mohler was knocked out during the first round of ballots, receiving about a quarter of the votes. In a runoff, Litton got 52 percent of the vote, and Stone got close to 48 percent.

In a news conference, Litton described himself as both theologically and politically conservative. Like Stone, Mohler, and other candidates, he is an inerrantist and a complementarian—believing the Bible is without error and that men and women have different roles in the church and family.

Some critics of Litton have referred to him as “moderate” or liberal. Litton has been active in the Pledge Group, which works on racial reconciliation in Mobile, Alabama, where he has been pastor for 27 years. That work has taught him the need for humility, he said, something that has become a hallmark of his ministry. —Bob Smietana, Religion News Service

The SBC sidesteps a direct response to critical race theory

It was fully expected that the SBC would have to grapple with critical race theory while gathered in Nashville. At its last pre-COVID meeting in 2019, the denomination had approved a resolution saying that CRT—an academic discourse around the idea that racism is a systemic, social construct—could be used as an analytical tool “subordinate to Scripture.”

But since then, CRT has become one of the touchstones of the US culture wars, and there has been mounting internal pressure for the SBC to condemn it outright. In

November 2020, six SBC seminary presidents released a statement calling CRT incompatible with their faith. As a result, at least two Black churches left the denomination and many other Black Baptists questioned their future within it.

Ultimately, the SBC ignored proposed resolutions decrying CRT or overturning the 2019 resolution.

Instead, messengers, or delegates, overwhelmingly approved the vaguely worded Resolution 2, “On the Sufficiency of Scripture for Race and Racial Reconciliation,” which rejects any worldview that bases human identity in ethnicity as well as any theory that denies that racism is rooted in sin. The resolution also affirms the Bible as a sufficient source for any work related to racial reconciliation. —Dawn Araujo-Hawkins

SBC messengers stand up for sexual abuse survivors

The SBC will set up a task force to address concerns that denominational leaders have mistreated abuse victims and mishandled allegations of abuse.

The denomination’s executive committee had previously hired Guidepost Solutions to review its handling of abuse allegations. The new task force will either take over that review or set up a separate third-party review.

Various internal reports and leaked documents have included allegations that leaders of the executive committee have mistreated and ignored abuse survivors. One report alleged that SBC leaders failed to look into allegations of abuse against a church staffer who allegedly moved on to abuse children at other churches. A leaked email from a former executive committee staffer referred to advocates for abuse survivors as being misled by the devil.

The request for the task force came a day after Southern Baptists adopted a resolution that stated the messengers believe “any person who has committed sexual abuse is permanently disqualified from holding the office of pastor.” They also recommended affiliated churches apply this standard to all church leaders. —Bob Smietana, Religion News Service

SBC megachurch under review for ordaining women on Mother’s Day

A committee that determines whether churches are conforming to SBC affiliation rules will consider whether Saddleback Church, a prominent California congregation

led by best-selling author Rick Warren, can continue in fellowship with the SBC after Saddleback recently ordained three women pastors.

Shad Tibbs, pastor of Fellowship Baptist Church in Trout, Louisiana, 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. At the very least, I am asking that the validity of this matter be looked into.”

Local associations or state conventions have removed several churches after they appointed women as pastors, but the SBC—the national body—has not.

According to the SBC bylaws, the credentials committee considers such requests and makes a recommendation to the executive committee if it concludes the church is “not in friendly cooperation.” If the executive committee decides the church is no longer welcome, its ruling will be made public. If a church should appeal such a decision, messengers at an annual meeting could decide whether to sustain the ruling.

—Religion News Service