

SBC elects first black president

by [Adelle M. Banks](#) in the [July 11, 2012](#) issue

Pointing heavenward and wiping away tears, pastor Fred Luter was elected in New Orleans as the first black president of the predominantly white Southern Baptist Convention. “To God be the glory for the things that he has done,” said Luter moments after more than 7,000 Southern Baptists leapt to their feet, cheered and shouted “Hallelujah” when he was declared their next leader.

Luter, 55, a former street preacher who brought his mostly black New Orleans congregation back from near annihilation after Hurricane Katrina in 2005, will lead the nation’s largest Protestant denomination for at least a year. Most Southern Baptist presidents traditionally serve two one-year terms.

Rather than rally behind a traditional white conservative candidate, white Southern Baptists leaders had for more than a year urged the nomination and election of Luter. Many said it was long past time for such a move for a denomination that was born in 1845 in a defense of slavery.

“We have the opportunity to make history, to show a watching world the truth about our savior and ourselves,” David Crosby, pastor of the mostly white First Baptist Church of New Orleans, said in his nomination of Luter on June 19. “Let’s give our ballots a voice and shout out to the world—Jesus is Lord! This is our president! We are Southern Baptists!”

Crosby’s church, which sustained less damage after Katrina, shared space with Luter’s remaining congregants after the hurricane.

Members of black Southern Baptist churches—which make up about 8 percent of the SBC’s 45,000 congregations—have hailed the expected election. Some said they were shocked and never thought they’d live to see such an occurrence.

In previous years, black Southern Baptists attended the two-day annual meeting in limited numbers. Some complained that they seldom saw people who look like them speaking from the platform. This year, more blacks attended than usual and ushers came from Luter’s Franklin Avenue Baptist Church.

In the months before the election, SBC ethicist Richard Land was embroiled in controversy for saying President Obama and civil rights leaders had exploited the case of Trayvon Martin, the unarmed Florida teen who was killed by a neighborhood watch volunteer. Land—reprimanded and stripped of his radio talk show as a result of the racial tension his remarks caused— was among those who cheered Luter’s election.

“Today was as truly a historic moment as Southern Baptist life will ever experience,” said Land, who helped craft the denomination’s 1995 statement that apologized for the “deplorable sin” of racism. “Praise God for his redeeming grace.”

Many said before his election that Luter deserved to be elected not because he is black but because of his commitment to the denomination, preaching skills and success in rebuilding his church into one of the largest in Louisiana. A recent survey by the SBC’s LifeWay Research found that the majority of Southern Baptist pastors were ready for a black president.

Luter closed out the annual pastors’ conference on the eve of the Southern Baptist meeting and had the audience on its feet as he waved his Bible in a fervent sermon.

“Only the Word of God can change the heart of a racist; only the Word of God can change the desire of a child molester,” he preached. “The Word of God can change the lifestyle of a homosexual. The Word of God is the only hope for America today.”

On June 18, at the end of the SBC’s National African American Fellowship business meeting, the group’s president reminded members to be sure they had their packet of ballots with them for the next day’s vote.

“If you never cast a vote before, you need to cast this one,” James Dixon urged, drawing laughter and an “Amen.” “If you need a class on it, we will teach you how to do it.”

Dixon said, “We’ve been working on this for years,” making sure that African Americans were considered for elective office, but noted that white leaders made an unusually hefty push for Luter. “In reality, that’s where it needed to come from,” he said.

Anticipation of the vote continued as the meeting opened. “We cannot undo our past, but here in New Orleans you can show the world we are redoing our future,”

said Chuck Kelley Jr., president of New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary.

Many have tied Luter's election to the need for greater evangelism among racial and ethnic minorities as the denomination suffered its fifth consecutive year of a decline in membership.

Prior to the election, outgoing SBC President Bryant Wright in his farewell address cautioned that Southern Baptists should not get sidetracked in their evangelism efforts by debates over "finer points" of theology.

"If we pride ourselves more on being a traditional Southern Baptist or more on being a Calvinist or a Reformed theologian more than we are thankful that we are Christ-centered and biblically based and known by our fellow man that way," Wright warned, "then it is time to repent of theological idolatry." —RNS