

Southern Baptists approve alternate, unofficial name

by [Adelle M. Banks](#) in the [July 25, 2012](#) issue

Members of the Southern Baptist Convention narrowly accepted the alternate—but unofficial—name of “Great Commission Baptists” as the denomination attempts to reach beyond the Bible Belt.

Delegates meeting in New Orleans last month heatedly debated whether to affirm a recommendation from church leaders that congregations and other Southern Baptist organizations voluntarily use the “Great Commission” moniker. The term refers to Jesus’ command that his followers spread his message worldwide.

On the second day of their two-day meeting, officials announced June 20 that the unofficial name was approved with 53 percent in favor and 46 percent against. The debate on the first day immediately followed the election of Fred Luter as the denomination’s first African-American president.

Supporters of the change said the option might help reach those who are put off by the word “Southern” in the name because of its link to the region and to the Civil War-era defense of slavery.

“It would have been terrible if we elect Fred with enthusiasm and then reject one of the biggest needs that African-Americans expressed to us,” said Jimmy Draper, chairman of the task force that studied a possible name change. “It would have been inconsistent.”

Luter, at a press conference following the New Orleans pastor’s election, said, “I love it,” in reference to the optional new name. “I think it’s a win-win situation.”

At the same time, he said he was “amazed” there had been so much debate over the name and pointed to it as an example of how Southern Baptists can get sidetracked by divisions instead of what they have in common.

Southern Baptist researchers recently found that more than 70 percent of Southern Baptist pastors think the official name should continue, and more than half had no plans to use “Great Commission Baptists.” Top SBC officials had rejected months earlier any official name change, primarily because of the great expense in changing the legal name on documents.

The election of Luter—promoted enthusiastically for a year by Southern Baptist leaders—came only a week after the expected report that for the fifth year in a row, the Southern Baptist Convention has seen a drop in its total membership.

The denomination’s membership in 2011 was 15,978,112, a drop of nearly 1 percent from the 2010 figure of 16.1 million, according to the denomination’s LifeWay Christian Resources.

Southern Baptists, who remain the nation’s largest Protestant body, reported slight increases in total number of churches and baptisms last year. The church total in 2011 was 45,764, a 0.08 percent increase over the 2010 total of 45,727. Baptisms rose 0.70 percent to 333,341. —RNS