

Baptist leader calls denial of voting rights 'evil'

by [Adelle M. Banks](#) in the [February 23, 2022](#) issue



Willie D. Francois III, cochair of the Social Justice Commission of the National Progressive Baptist Convention, speaks at the denomination's midwinter meeting in Atlanta on January 18. (Photo by Roy Lewis, courtesy of PNBC)

On the day of a major voting rights debate on Capitol Hill, a social justice coordinator for the Progressive National Baptist Convention said fighting for voting rights is an effort to conquer evil.

"This convention practices a ministry of erosion," said Willie D. Francois III, cochair of its social justice arm, during a January 18 news conference held in Atlanta and livestreamed on the denomination's social media.

"What does that mean? We keep showing up so that we wear evil down. The denial of voting rights is evil. The protection of Senate rules over the protection of the public is evil," he continued, referring to the failure of Senate Democrats to amend filibuster rules, which would have allowed two key voting rights bills to be approved without Republican support.

The day after the news conference, Senate Republicans blocked both bills from advancing to a final vote.

Regardless, the PNBC leaders said they intend to move ahead with plans to lobby members of Congress in March and register voters weekly in their congregations and

communities, aiming to increase voter rolls by 500,000.

Adolphus Lacey, a pastor in Brooklyn, New York, said these efforts will continue despite the ongoing coronavirus pandemic.

“COVID is real; COVID is a threat,” said Lacey, a PNBC social justice commissioner. “But even more serious than COVID, as real and scary as it is, is to see thousands and thousands of thousands of voters not being able to vote, and it was on our watch. We refuse to stop. We refuse to turn around.”

The denomination’s voter registration initiative will be aimed particularly at millennials and members of Gen Z. But it will also focus on states with key races expected to have close margins, said Darryl Gray of St. Louis.

“We don’t want to just register a half a million people,” said Gray, a PNBC pastor who served in the Kansas Senate in the 1980s and ran an unsuccessful 2020 campaign for Missouri state representative. “We want to register a half a million people in United States senatorial campaigns that are going to be consequential.”

PNBC leaders noted they belong to the denominational home of Martin Luther King Jr., in a state at the center of voting rights debates. King copastored Ebenezer Baptist Church and worked with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, both in Atlanta.

“We believe it is no coincidence that this convention, born out of the need to fight for justice, is in this state and city at such a time as this when our voting rights are under fierce attack,” said David R. Peoples, president of the PNBC.

“This is a call to action from the Progressive National Baptist Convention. We’ve come to not just pray. We’ve come to not just push. We’ve come to not just preserve. We’ve come to protect the right to vote.” —Religion News Service