

Ouster of Saddleback and Fern Creek from SBC over women pastors is affirmed

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June 14, 2023



Linda Barnes Popham speaks at the Southern Baptist Convention annual meeting in New Orleans on June 13. (RNS photo by Emily Kask)

Delegates to the Southern Baptist Convention's annual meeting affirmed a decision to expel two Southern Baptist churches, including Rick Warren's Saddleback Church in Orange County, California, because they employed women as pastors. The churches had appealed to the meeting, the denomination's ruling body, to be allowed to remain.

Both churches were denied by a strong majority of the delegates, known as messengers.

The body affirmed the ouster of Saddleback by a vote of 9,432 to 1,212. The vote went against Fern Creek Baptist Church in Louisville, Kentucky, by 9,700 to 806.

A third church, Freedom Church in Vero Beach, Florida, was also voted out after the SBC's credentials committee had recommended it be expelled for its "lack of intent to cooperate in resolving concerns regarding a sexual abuse allegation."

After the drama of Tuesday's session at the annual meeting, when representatives of the church were given three minutes to appeal the decisions made by the SBC's Executive Committee earlier this year, the announcement of the vote totals on Wednesday was greeted with muted applause, but mostly silence, from the meeting floor.

Saddleback, whose case was argued by founding pastor and bestselling author Rick Warren, had been ousted for naming Stacie Wood, wife of Warren successor Andy Wood, as "teaching pastor" since she and her husband arrived at the Lake Forest, California, megachurch last summer.

Warren and Linda Barnes Popham, who leads the Louisville church, each argued that Baptists don't agree on a range of matters—from Calvinism to COVID-19—but that hadn't halted the ability of them to have a shared commitment to spreading the gospel.

R. Albert Mohler Jr., president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, argued against keeping either Saddleback or Fern Creek within the Southern Baptist fold. He said the idea of women pastors "is an issue of fundamental biblical authority that does violate both the doctrine and the order of the Southern Baptist Convention."

Newly reelected SBC President Bart Barber appeared before the outcome of the votes were announced to urge an appropriate response. "I believe in the sanctity of marriage, but I know sometimes in our churches people wind up in biblical divorce," he said. "But we don't throw divorce parties at our church, OK?"

After Baptists responded with applause, he added: "And whatever these results are, I'm asking you: Behave like Christians, OK?"

After Wednesday's vote, Warren appeared resigned. "We lost," he said at a press conference. "I wasn't expecting to win. We actually got about 700 more votes than I expected."

Warren said he took on the appeal for the sake of pastors of other churches who don't have the same kind of platform that he does and who worry that SBC leaders will come after them. "They can't hurt me," he said. He noted that Saddleback will still be part of its local Baptist association and the California Baptist state convention.

But Warren criticized the move for its shortsightedness. "It's not really smart when you are losing half a million members a year to kick out people who want to fellowship with you," he said.

The pastor, known for his wisdom on the topic of planting and growing churches, said, "The messengers voted from conformity and uniformity, not unity. . . . The only way you can give unity is to love diversity." He added, "Truth wins out over tradition."

Popham was equally undaunted. Dressed in green t-shirt from her church's children's music program, the pastor said the church will keep doing what they've been doing for decades. Last week, she said, three kids in the church had accepted Jesus as their savior during the church's Vacation Bible School.

"I think God has greater things for us now because the God we serve is so much bigger than the Southern Baptist Convention," she said, adding. "I need to say thank you Southern Baptist. You've given us great publicity."

Freedom Church also had its say in front of the delegates on Tuesday, with Donald Stewart, an elder of the Florida congregation, saying in his three-minute speech that the church's former pastor resigned and is "no longer involved in the leadership of the church."

But Executive Committee member Doug Inserra cast doubt on whether that pastor would remain resigned. He added that the state convention and a local association in Florida "provided Freedom Church with the confirmed and admitted sexual misconduct of the individual serving as the senior pastor, yet Freedom Church took zero action."

The closely watched decisions about women pastors demonstrated that many Southern Baptists remain committed to the Baptist Faith and Message, their doctrinal statement that declares: "While both men and women are gifted for service in the church, the office of pastor is limited to men as qualified by Scripture."

The three churches were among eight congregations officially disaffiliated by the denomination's Executive Committee since last year's annual meeting.