

Day before voting on Law Amendment, SBC removes church that is Mike Law's neighbor

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Worship service at First Baptist Alexandria, Va.

One day before the much-anticipated vote on a constitutional amendment that would clarify the Southern Baptist Convention's rejection of women in ministry, messengers to the SBC annual meeting overwhelmingly kicked out another church for its "egalitarian" views.

First Baptist Church of Alexandria, Va., now joins the ranks of an unknown number of churches that have left the SBC — either voluntarily or involuntarily — rather than honor the SBC's ban on ordaining women, allowing women to preach or giving women the title "pastor."

While the SBC's Baptist Faith and Message already says the office of pastor is "reserved for men" by the Bible — a view highly contested outside conservative evangelical circles — the Constitution says cooperating churches should have "a faith and practice which closely identifies with the convention's adopted statement of faith."

Robert Stephens

"Closely identifies" is not the same as strictly adheres to, and this has caused friction as a number of otherwise conservative SBC churches also believe women may be called and gifted for ministry.

The movement to pass a constitutional amendment demanding adherence to the ban on female pastors and preachers is Mike Law, who serves as pastor of another Southern Baptist church located 4 miles away from First Baptist in Alexandria.

Law and other strict complementarians in the SBC have been after First Baptist Alexandria for several years. Some have charged publicly that the Credentials Committee has given the Virginia church a pass while recommending the expulsion of other churches.

And this week, it was not the Credentials Committee that recommended this expulsion; it was a messenger making a motion from the floor. That motion was

referred to the Credentials Committee, which promptly returned with a recommendation for expulsion.

SBC policies allow churches slated for expulsion to have 3 minutes to make their final appeal for why they should be allowed to stay in. Robert Stephens, senior pastor at First Baptist Alexandria, gave that speech.

“The role of women in ministry at First Alexandria is not recent, it’s not a cultural concession or a change to accommodate or sacrifice biblical authority,” he said. “In 1980, we ordained our first female pastor, and since then we have ordained two other females to the work of the gospel ministry as late as 2008.

“Women have had a prominent role within the ministry in pastoral positions within the leadership of First Alexandria for over 44 years. First Alexandria stands before you today as a testament that we can maintain a fruitful partnership with churches that take a different stance on women in ministry. For 44 years, we have continued our partnership with this convention, engaging in kingdom work while having females as pastor.

“Our presence clearly demonstrates our shared commitment to prioritizing cooperation for the work of the kingdom and the glory of God, which has been successful. At First Alexandria, ... we are unwavering in our efforts to guide people to Jesus and envisioning a future where individuals from every nation, tribe and language stand before the throne of God. For nearly 180 years, we have been able to do this together.

“We are at a time in human history when the opportunity is at hand for us to make great strides in fulfilling the Commission of the Lord Jesus. Let’s keep working together. We at First Baptist are advancing the gospel, and we hope that we will continue to work alongside you.”

Then the chairman of the SBC Credential Committee, Jonathan Sams, offered the committee’s rationale for expulsion.

“The Credentials Committee wants to emphasize that our opinion was formed using the current language of the Baptist Faith and Message 2000 and the current language of Article 3 of the Constitution,” he said.

He added: “The Credentials Committee has inquired of First Baptist Alexandria regarding its beliefs, and the church expressed ... an egalitarian view regarding the role of women in the church, which is contrary to the complementarian beliefs provided in the Baptist Faith and Message. We asked the church directly to explain their beliefs regarding the office of pastor-elder-overseer. The church responded saying they believe ‘both men and women can satisfy the requirements of the pastor

elder overseer office' and more specifically that they believe a woman is 'biblically qualified to fill the senior pastor position.'

“We asked if the church might consider calling a woman as their lead senior pastor. The church responded affirmatively saying, yes, they would because they do not ‘believe that the Bible limits the fulfillment of this office exclusively to men.’”

SBC President Bart Barber called for a ballot vote. With more than 10,000 messengers registered at the time, only about 7,300 voted on this matter. Messengers upheld the committee’s recommendation to expel the Virginia church by a 92% majority.