

Southern Baptists Vote to Further Expand Restrictions on Women as Leaders (NY Times Newsletter Article, 6/14/23)

By [Ruth Graham](#) and [Elizabeth Dias](#)

After overwhelmingly voting to finalize the expulsion of two churches with female pastors, Southern Baptists voted on Wednesday to further expand restrictions on women in church leadership, potentially opening up hundreds of new churches to investigation and expulsions.

Delegates to the Southern Baptist Convention's annual meeting in New Orleans approved an amendment to their constitution that their churches must have "only men as any kind of pastor or elder as qualified by Scripture."

Until now, the fight was limited to pastoral leadership and was included in theological statements, not the group's official legal documents. The amendment must be passed again next year for it to go into effect.

"Now is not the time for half measures or delay," Mike Law, a young pastor who proposed the amendment said, speaking from a microphone in the convention hall. He framed voting against the amendment as being afraid of the Bible.

The vote was taken by raised ballot with no official tally, and the results appeared to be somewhat narrow. Officials rejected a move for a hand count and then broke for lunch.

The constitutional amendment threatens to unleash a crisis for the denomination ahead of next year's final vote. Bart Barber, who was re-elected president of the S.B.C. on Tuesday, acknowledged that the faction pushing for the change was poised to file complaints against every church that they believed violated the tightening standards — potentially an estimated 1,900 churches who have women pastors.

But, he said, "Even with these changes, they have to be applied church by church, and Southern Baptists have a history of being judiciously careful when they look at specific circumstances."

The decision comes after the ejection this year of five churches [with women as pastors](#). On Tuesday, the convention cast votes against readmitting the two churches that appealed that decision, rejecting impassioned pleas from the leaders of Saddleback Church in Southern California, one of the denomination's largest churches, and Fern Creek Baptist Church in Louisville, Ky.

[The dramatic clash](#) over the place of women in leadership is the result of moves by an ultraconservative wing of the S.B.C. to reverse what it sees as a liberal drift. More than 90 percent of the delegates voted in favor of Fern Creek's expulsion, and almost as many

voted to confirm the removal of Saddleback, which was founded by the prominent preacher and author Rick Warren.

Editors' Picks

In a news conference on Wednesday morning after his church's final expulsion, Mr. Warren excoriated the convention for silencing him, comparing opposition to his church to a "pogrom."

"There are people who want to take the S.B.C. backward," he said. "Some people want to take it back to the 1950s — that is their golden age for the church, the 1950s, when basically white men rule supreme, and the woman's place is in the home, and there is not a lot of diversity."

He warned that the toxic politics of American life more broadly had seeped into a church culture that should be marked by generosity and cooperation, citing vitriolic splits over pandemic masks, vaccines, the #MeToo and Black Lives Matter movements, and who should be president.

"A fundamentalist is someone who has stopped listening," he said.

In a signal of divisions still churning within the denomination, its own leadership committee had recommended against changing the constitution, calling it unnecessary since its statement of faith had forbidden women pastors for more than 20 years.

Though most Southern Baptists believe in that principle, they were content for many years to allow individual Baptist churches to make their own leadership decisions. In recent years, though, the more conservative faction within the denomination has been unwilling to look the other way, and has pressed to enforce the standard more uniformly from the national level.

Some conservatives saw the issue as an opportunity to press for ideological purity in a denomination that has long been a bellwether for American evangelicalism.

During a brief floor debate, cut short by violations of parliamentary procedure, Sarah Clatworthy, a church administrator from Texas, argued that the convention should shut the door to "feminism."

Bob Bender, the pastor emeritus of a church in Colorado, begged delegates to reject the amendment, saying Southern Baptists could disagree over "nonessential" issues. "The whole world is watching," he said.

The vote sets into a motion a conflict expected to come to a head at next year's convention in Indianapolis, when the decision must be approved a second time to go into effect.

This year's vote came after an organized campaign by ultraconservatives who have rising influence in the denomination. Two years ago, the faction was considered a fringe minority. Some [compared themselves to pirates](#) who wanted to "take the ship" and steer the church in a new course on issues of race, gender and politics.

This week the S.B.C. executive committee, a top leadership body that oversaw the expulsion effort, elected as its next chairman Philip Robertson, a Louisiana pastor who leads that state's chapter of the Conservative Baptist Network, an ultraconservative group founded in 2020 to fight what it sees as the erosion of biblical truth in an increasingly secular society. Members of the coalition have been among the most vocal advocates of cracking down against women in leadership positions.

Evidence of the denomination's rightward turn could be seen in their rejection of Mr. Warren, Saddleback's founder.

As part of his appeal to remain in the Southern Baptist Convention, Mr. Warren noted that the denomination's theological statement was 4,032 words long. "Saddleback disagrees with one word," he said on Tuesday. "That's 99.99999999 percent in agreement! Isn't that close enough?"

The crowd shouted back at him, "No!"

After announcing his retirement in 2021, Mr. Warren named a husband and wife as his joint successors. The church ordained three women as ministers the same year; in May, the church announced that one of those women, Katie Edwards, would become campus pastor of the church's flagship location in Lake Forest, Calif.

Some conservatives in the denomination saw it as a provocation, done in open defiance of the S.B.C.'s [statement of beliefs](#), which says, "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 ousted churches will continue to function as churches, but will lose their association with the denomination and the ability to participate in its programs, including its robust missionary and disaster relief programs. Like many larger Southern Baptist churches, Saddleback does not include the word "Baptist" in its name, and for most of its history it has not emphasized the connection.

Three other churches that were expelled in February for having female pastors chose not to appeal the decision.

In the line for Starbucks at a hotel near the convention hall on Wednesday morning, a group of young female delegates hurried to get coffee in time to be in the hall to hear the vote results. Kristan Pounders, 30, from Big Level Baptist Church in Wiggins, Miss., said that she thought the pastors appealing the expulsions had well-presented arguments, but that they were not in agreement with what Southern Baptists believed. Her church does not have women in pastoral roles, including youth ministry, she said.

"We are not telling that church what to do, but we can no longer be in fellowship," she said, adding that she supported the decision to remove the churches.

As Linda Barnes Popham, pastor of the expelled Fern Creek Baptist Church, waited to hear the results of the vote, a young pastor, Benjamin Bauer, came to give her a hug. Mr. Bauer, who leads First Baptist Church in Brighton, Mich., wanted her to know that “the way she interprets theology has nothing to do with the way that Christ has called us to love her as our neighbor.”

But he voted to keep out her church. He believed that she interpreted the Bible incorrectly, and that churches that allow women pastors eventually “allow the marriage of homosexuals, too, and then even allowing homosexuals to serve as pastors,” he said.

When the appeals were over on Tuesday, a woman from Texas pushed through the crowd to find Ms. Barnes Popham. The woman had brought her 14-year-old daughter, who was weeping. Her daughter wanted to be a pastor one day, she said, and wanted to meet Ms. Barnes Popham, who gave her hope for the future.

“It is not a sin to be a woman,” said the daughter, Lottie Baird. “Why can’t we be shepherds to lead the flock of God’s people?”

After the results were announced the next day, Ms. Barnes Popham said the volume of the opposition was hard to take in.

“This signals a decline for Southern Baptists,” she said. “I believe they are going to discourage so many women from ministry that women and their families will find other places to serve. There are such talented women out there, who obviously God has called.”

Her voice wavered, and she struggled to hold back tears for the first time that week. She was thinking of her childhood church in Alabama, and the leaders there who guided her as she first felt her call from God more than 50 years ago.

“I believed those people,” she said. “I believed I was supposed to follow Christ wherever he led.”