

Many Black SBC churches have women pastors on staff. Will they be expelled next?

by [Bob Smietana](#)

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Delegates, known as messengers, vote during the first day of the Southern Baptist Convention on June 13. (RNS photo by Emily Kask)

Earlier this year, Southern Baptists expelled five churches from the nation's largest Protestant denomination for having women as pastors.

Now, the leader of a fellowship of Black Southern Baptist pastors wonders if their churches will be next.

In a letter last week, the president of the Southern Baptist Convention's National African American Fellowship asked to meet with the denomination's president, saying the SBC's recent decisions to expel churches with women pastors had caused

“division within the SBC and may disproportionately impact NAAF affiliated congregations.”

“Many of our churches assign the title ‘pastor’ to women who oversee ministries of the church under the authority of a male Senior Pastor, i.e., Children’s Pastor, Worship Pastor, Discipleship Pastor, etc.,” wrote Gregory Perkins, pastor of [The View Church](#) in Menifee, California, and president of the NAAF.

He also said a proposed amendment to the SBC’s constitution to bar churches with women pastors violated the autonomy of local churches—a vital Baptist belief.

During the recent SBC annual meeting, local church delegates, known as messengers, voted to [affirm](#) the decision to expel Saddleback Church in Southern California—one of the denomination’s largest churches—and Fern Creek Baptist Church in Louisville. Those two churches had appealed an earlier decision made by the SBC’s Executive Committee that they were no longer in “friendly cooperation” with the convention.

Three other expelled churches—including two predominantly Black churches where women had succeeded their late husbands as pastors—did not appeal.

Messengers also [voted](#) to change the SBC’s constitution to bar churches with women pastors. That proposed change would only allow churches to be part of the convention that affirm, appoint or employ “only men as any kind of pastor or elder as qualified by Scripture.” The change must be ratified at the SBC’s 2024 annual meeting in order to take effect.

“This may signal to churches in the SBC that do not believe that women should be the Senior Pastor but allow women the usage of a pastoral title, or appoints a woman to a pastoral role, are no longer welcome in the SBC,” wrote Perkins.

Among the churches that hold the belief that women can lead in non-senior pastor roles is the church Perkins pastors, which has one woman on staff with the title of pastor. He wrote that many of the more than 4,000 congregations in the NAAF hold that view as well.

Perkins said that leaders of the NAAF respected the SBC’s democratic process and that messengers had the right to vote their conscience. However, they asked for a time of “prayer and dialogue” to discuss the consequences of the votes at the SBC

meeting.

The letter, sent by email, was also [posted](#) on the NAAF website. That website also includes a link to a [document](#) with more details about how the decisions made by the SBC could affect churches. That document urges pastors to take an active role in the discussion over the issue of women pastors.

“You must be an active participant in this conversation and decision-making process as it has long-term implications for your church and other NAAF affiliated congregations,” the document advises.

While SBC churches cooperate to fund missions, seminaries, and other ministries, each local church is autonomous. They choose their own pastors, own their own buildings and control their own finances.

Perkins said that Christians who believe the Bible may come to different conclusions about how to apply its teachings. He said churches should engage in a “vigorous, yet constructive dialogue.”

“To disfellowship like-minded churches who share our faith in Jesus Christ, our belief in the authority of Scripture, our mandate to carry out the Great Commission, and our agreement to give cooperatively based upon a local-church governance decision dishonors the spirit of cooperation and the guiding tenets of our denomination,” he wrote.

The letter was addressed to SBC president and Texas pastor Bart Barber and copied to board members and officers of the NAAF, as well as staff at the SBC’s Executive Committee.

Barber confirmed he had received the letter and said that the call for a season of prayer and dialogue was “a Christ-honoring, biblical way to approach decisions when fellow believers want to find common ground and make decisions together.”

“I honor and value these partners in the work of the gospel,” said Barber in a text message. “I will make sure that the entire SBC family has ample opportunity for prayer and dialogue throughout the coming year leading up to our meeting next June in Indianapolis.”

Barber said that he planned to meet with NAAF leaders at a Black church leadership conference in North Carolina next week.

In recent years, the SBC has touted the growth of Black, Hispanic and other diverse congregations in the convention. However, a number of high-profile Black churches have left the SBC in recent years over issues of race and politics. —Religion News Service