

All Southern Baptist eyes on black New Orleans pastor

by [Bruce Nolan](#)

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NEW ORLEANS (RNS) Even before the Southern Baptist Convention elected the Rev. Fred Luter to national office, there was already widespread speculation that Luter is poised to become the denomination's first African-American president.

Representatives of 16 million Southern Baptists overwhelmingly elected Luter first vice president on June 14 at their annual meeting in Phoenix.

By the time Baptists gather again next summer in Luter's backyard, many expect the pastor of this city's 5,000-member Franklin Avenue Baptist Church -- one of the largest Southern Baptist churches in the state -- to clinch the top post.

"Many of us are thinking this is the first step toward him being elected president next year," said Danny Akin, president of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, N.C., who nominated Luter for the vice presidency.

"I haven't talked to a person who hasn't affirmed that, including the present president, Bryant Wright, the past president, Frank Page" and others, Akin said. "There's tremendous interest and excitement about that."

Luter's election comes at a moment that the nation's largest Protestant denomination confronts evidence that it has plateaued in numbers -- even declined slightly.

Moreover, some leaders of the predominantly white, socially conservative church say they are concerned that their ranks -- and

especially their leaders -- do not look like the nation as a whole.

In recent decades, the convention has passed 11 resolutions seeking "greater ethnic participation," including a 1995 resolution apologizing for its past defense of slavery, but church leaders deemed that insufficient.

"There's a sense that we're behind the curve in the SBC, that we're not really representative of our constituency at the level of leadership. That we need to be moving forward with more diversity," said the Rev. David Crosby of First Baptist Church in New Orleans.

Convention delegates, or "messengers," approved a plan in Phoenix to vigorously reach out to minorities to incorporate them in meaningful leadership positions.

"We're becoming more aware of the fact we should strive to make church on earth look like church in heaven," Akin said in an interview.

Luter's allies portray him as the right man for the job next year, regardless of the denomination's explicit desire to incorporate more people of color into its leadership ranks.

"I think Fred can be elected on merit, regardless of race or color," Akin said. "But he gives us opportunity to make a proactive statement, to say something about who we want to be."

Luter, a gifted preacher, has traveled widely in Southern Baptist circles for almost 20 years and built a solid reputation all across the convention, Crosby said.

In 2001, the last time Southern Baptists convened in New Orleans, he was given a plum preaching slot and delivered a tour-de-force sermon that roused 10,000 messengers to their feet.

Luter took over the Franklin Avenue pulpit in 1986. Formerly a white church whose congregation had left for the suburbs, it had only about 60 members and was near death.

At the time, Luter was a commodities clerk, not even formally ordained. His preaching experience was in borrowed churches and street corners, including his native Lower 9th Ward. Luter was ordained and installed as pastor on the same day, he said.

The congregation grew. And although it became predominantly black, like its changing neighborhood, it kept its Southern Baptist affiliation.

Franklin Avenue numbered about 7,000 members just before Hurricane Katrina destroyed it in 2005.

In the following months, evangelical pastors around the state sent money and volunteers to help Franklin Avenue get back on its feet. It currently claims about 4,900 members, according to the Louisiana Baptist Convention.

"He's known not only as a great preacher, but an effective pastor. He's worked hard and people love him. He's a model for pastors all over the convention," Crosby said.

Meantime, Luter said he is overwhelmed by the sudden attention.

Although a movement to draft him for the presidency has quietly circulated for months, he said he was approached about the vice presidency only in the past two weeks.

With the elevation to that office, he said, people are congratulating him as if the presidency were a foregone conclusion. "My head's spinning," he said.

"I haven't decided what to do, but every step I take people are telling me, 'It's your time,'" particularly with next year's meeting scheduled for New Orleans, Luter said.

His congregation is in the midst of a major capital campaign to build a new church in eastern New Orleans. He said he would decide whether to seek the presidency after consulting with his church and other leaders.