

Tennessee Southern Baptists shun church with a woman senior pastor

Ellen Di Giosia was told that she could not vote in a statewide gathering of congregations.

by [Bob Allen](#) in the [December 6, 2017](#) issue



Ellen Di Giosia

Can a church with a female pastor be Southern Baptist? The Tennessee Baptist Convention has said no.

The group of 390 churches in Tennessee debated 15 minutes before voting overwhelmingly November 14 to shun First Baptist Church in Jefferson City, Tennessee, for calling Ellen Di Giosia as senior pastor.

Earlier this fall, a 15-member committee tasked with credentialing messengers for the annual statewide gathering of Southern Baptist congregations declared that a church with a woman serving as senior pastor does not fit the definition of a “cooperating church” as defined by convention bylaws.

Di Giosia, who previously served as associate pastor of faith formation at Woodland Baptist Church in San Antonio, Texas, told worshipers that church leaders had received communication from the Tennessee Baptist Mission Board that if they sent messengers to the November 12–15 meeting in Hendersonville, Tennessee, those messengers would not be seated.

“This is in essence the state convention saying that we are no longer welcome,” she said in a sermon. “To these institutions, our commitment to equal treatment of women and men in the church is the sum of what makes us ‘us.’”

First Baptist Church in Jefferson City relates primarily to the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and Tennessee CBF but also maintains ties with Tennessee Baptists and the Southern Baptist Convention.

Leaders of the Tennessee CBF wrote an open letter of affirmation delivered in time for Di Giosia’s installation on November 5. More than 25 active Tennessee Baptist pastors and more than 500 ministers, lay leaders, and others with Tennessee connections added their names.

“We welcome your new senior pastor, the Reverend Ellen Di Giosia, and look forward to working alongside her in the years to come,” the letter said. “Rest assured, we shall support her ministry with our prayers, fellowship, and love.”

According to the denominational newspaper *Baptist and Reflector*, the credentials committee interpreted the definition of a “cooperating church” in the state convention’s constitution and bylaws to include fidelity to the SBC’s Baptist Faith and Message, which states “the office of pastor is limited to men as qualified by Scripture.”

Di Giosia and deacon chair John McGraw were quoted by the newspaper saying they believe any differences between the congregation and the Tennessee Baptist Convention are relatively small.

“Our culture is polarized and angry,” they wrote. “We have an opportunity to demonstrate a different way of living—one that does not capitulate to the spirit of the age which says that if we do not agree on everything, we cannot cooperate on anything.” —Baptist News Global

A version of this article appears in the December 6 print edition under the title “Tennessee Southern Baptists sever connection to church with a woman senior pastor.”