

Southern Baptists don't get votes to add 'only men' pastors language to constitution

by [Adelle M. Banks](#)

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Left to right, Meredith Stone, president of Baptist Women in Ministry; Heather Deal, MWIM director of development; and Nikki Hardeman, BWIM director of advocating for women in ministry, stand outside the Indiana Convention Center in Indianapolis on June 12 as Southern Baptists head into their annual meeting. (RNS photo/Adelle M. Banks)

Southern Baptists failed to adopt a change in their constitution that would explicitly state that "only men" can be "any kind of pastor" in affiliated churches.

The Wednesday vote, 61.45 percent in favor and 38.38 percent against, did not receive the two-thirds tally required during the second day of the two-day annual meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention. A total of 8,284 messengers, or delegates, voted.

Messengers [voted overwhelmingly for the amendment at their meeting last year](#) after it was proposed by a Virginia pastor who said the measure would bring clarity that a Southern Baptist church “holds the Bible’s teachings and our convention’s beliefs.”

The proposed amendment, which required affirmative votes at two consecutive annual meetings, expanded the definition of a cooperating church to say it “affirms, appoints, or employs only men as any kind of pastor or elder as qualified by Scripture.”

It is rare for Southern Baptists, who are part of the nation’s largest Protestant denomination, to not affirm a measure with a second consecutive vote.

“If it were to fail, this would likely be the first time that has happened,” Jonathan Howe, vice president for communications of the SBC Executive Committee, told journalists prior to the meeting.

There was much division, speculation, and interpretation ahead of the vote, with leaders such as new SBC Executive Committee President Jeff Iorg warning about unintended consequences—ranging from potential litigation to an overworked Credentials Committee—despite the amendment reflecting their viewpoints.

Some churches left the SBC before the first vote on the amendment was taken and there were concerns—including among Black churches—that more would leave if the new amendment became law. Some had said the constitutional change was unnecessary, in part because the SBC faith statement already says: “While both men and women are gifted for service in the church, the office of pastor/elder/overseer is limited to men as qualified by Scripture.”

Delegates to the 2023 meeting affirmed a decision to no longer affiliate with Saddleback Church, founded by bestselling author Rick Warren, due to its women pastors. Disaffiliation of a Kentucky church led by a woman was also approved at that meeting.

Spence Shelton, lead pastor of Mercy Church in Charlotte, North Carolina, argued Wednesday that those 2023 decisions should instruct the action at this year's meeting.

"We showed last year we have an effective mechanism," he said, suggesting before the vote that if there wasn't an overwhelming vote via written ballot, that should give the messengers pause.

"Why would we go forward with something that we are not unified in?" he asked.

Mike Law, the Arlington, Virginia, pastor who proposed the original language of the amendment, said at a microphone Wednesday that the amendment is necessary.

"Our culture may see this prohibition as harsh, but our God is all wise, and he wrote his word for the flourishing of both men and women," said Law. "This amendment is not about women in ministry. It's specifically about women in the pastoral office."

SBC pastors tend to be complementarian, believing women and men have complementary rather than equal roles in the church and the home.

"(B)ut most worried that the language was overly broad and might prevent women from being able to serve in any church leadership capacity whatsoever, including ones they currently hold (such as children's ministry)," R. Marie Griffith, a scholar of religion and politics at Washington University in St. Louis, told reporters after the vote. "Those voices made it safe to vote against the Law Amendment without fear of being called insufficiently complementarian."

After the vote on the Law Amendment failed, Jared Moore, pastor of Homesteads Baptist Church in Crossville, Tennessee, stood outside the convention meeting hall, talking with other pastors about what comes next.

Moore, a vocal supporter of the amendment, called the outcome of the vote "devastating." Still, he isn't ready to give up on the convention. He also said those who supported the amendment won't give up on their attempts to bar women from having the title or role of pastor.

"I want to encourage everybody to stay in SBC—to stay, contend, be faithful and don't leave," he said.

The vote came one day after messengers gathered in the Indiana Convention Center accepted the decision to disfellowship a Virginia church that has a woman serving as

pastor for children and women. The announcement about the vote concerning First Baptist Church of Alexandria, with 91.78 percent in favor, was met with silence after outgoing President Bart Barber commended his fellow Baptists for the way they accepted last year's disaffiliation votes with decorum.

"The role of women in ministry at First Alexandria is not a recent development—it's not a cultural concession or a change to accommodate or sacrifice biblical authority," Robert Stephens, the church's senior pastor, said at a microphone in response to the recommendation about his church prior to the vote.

"Women have had a prominent role within the ministry and 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 and ministry."

Jonathan Sams, chair of the SBC Credentials Committee, described the situation as one where the church and the convention have different approaches to autonomy.

"Each autonomous church determines for itself what it believes and with whom it will cooperate," he said. "Likewise, the Southern Baptist Convention, autonomous in its own sphere, may determine for itself what it believes and the churches with which it will cooperate. We find no joy in making this recommendation but have formed the opinion that the church's egalitarian beliefs regarding the office of pastor do not closely identify with the convention's adopted statement of faith."

At more than one forum the day before the SBC meeting began, the six candidates for the presidency acknowledged that three of them are for the amendment and three think it is not necessary.

Clint Pressley, the North Carolina pastor who was elected as the next SBC president on Wednesday, had said he was one of the three who supported the amendment proposed by Law.

"Whatever way it goes, I will still be working in strong cooperation with brothers and sisters who disagree with me about the Law Amendment," he said at a Tuesday forum with the presidential candidates at the business meeting of the National African American Fellowship of the SBC. "I don't think that's going to be the defining thing for Southern Baptists. Remember, we have the Baptist Faith and Message, which is a really strong doctrinal statement."

In an interview after the Tuesday vote, Stephens expressed his church's disappointment.

"We're very sad about it," he said. "We have been lifelong Southern Baptists, and we never envisioned a future where we wouldn't be."

Meredith Stone, executive director of Baptist Women in Ministry, stood outside the convention center with several staffers of her organization who opposed the theology of the proposed constitutional amendment and the decision about the Alexandria church. They held signs, such as "Preaching Power Knows No Gender," as a BWIM volunteer prayed some of the prayers recently shared with the ministry affirming women pastors.

"We're grieved with them, and we want to express our solidarity," she said of the church and its woman associate pastor. But she said they also celebrate the church "for being firm in their commitment to support women in ministry."

Ahead of the meeting, leaders of other churches wondered what their next steps would be, depending on the outcome of the proposed amendment.

Stephens said his congregation is moving on without fear as it looks forward to summer plans that include vacation Bible school and children's and music camps.

"We're about to enter one of our busiest, fullest seasons, and I see God's graciousness in all of the ministry that is in front of us," he said.

"Our mission has remained the same, and we're going to keep doing what we've always been doing. That doesn't change. We're still First Baptist Church of Alexandria. It's still all about the gospel for us. And we're going to keep at it."
—Religion News Service

Bob Smietana contributed to this story.