



Written by [Dave Bohon](#) on June 20, 2012

Southern Baptist Convention Elects First Black National Leader

The [Southern Baptist Convention](#) (SBC), America's largest Protestant denomination, made history June 19 when it elected the Rev. Fred Luter its president, the first black leader in the SBC's 167-year existence. Luter was chosen in his native New Orleans, where the SBC was meeting for its annual denominational conference, and where Luter pastors [Franklin Avenue Baptist Church](#).



Luter was nominated by fellow New Orleans pastor David Crosby, whose three-minute nomination speech was repeatedly interrupted by enthusiastic applause for the popular Luter. Crosby described Luter as a "fire-breathing, miracle-working pastor," adding that his friend and fellow minister "would likely be a candidate for sainthood one day if he were a Catholic." Crosby said that Luter is "qualified in every way" to guide the traditionally southern, White denomination. "He is a man of integrity with a loving family and an unblemished, untarnished reputation in this community where he has lived all his life."

[Baptist Press News](#), the SBC's official news organ, recounted how Luter had grown the fledgling Franklin Avenue congregation "from a remnant 65 people in a white-flight neighborhood to a congregation of more than 8,000" before the church's facility was destroyed by flooding in the wake of Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Crosby's own First Baptist Church took the devastated congregation in, helping Franklin Avenue Baptist Church get back on its feet. "Franklin Avenue is now [once again] approaching 5,000 worshippers each Sunday despite the depressed population of our city," Crosby said during his nomination speech. "... Fred is the only mega-church pastor I know of who has had to do it twice, and he did it against the trends and against the odds."

Luter's election comes as the SBC works to counter a reputation as being a Caucasian Christian fellowship that only grudgingly accepts racial and ethnic minorities. During this year's convention, SBC delegates were set to vote on an optional name for the denomination — Great Commission Baptists — an effort to distance the organization from its post-Civil War segregationist leanings. "Fearing the Southern Baptist name carried negative associations for many outsiders," reported *Baptist Press News*, "current SBC President Bryant Wright formed a study committee last year to consider a change. While the committee deemed a full and official name change to be too difficult and expensive, it suggested the alternative name as an option."



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But the Baptist news source noted that the alternative name “faces strong opposition, including from some members who are proud of the denomination’s association with conservative theology and politics.” It added that the “notion of changing the Southern Baptist name is not new: It was first proposed in 1903 and has been unsuccessfully brought up more than a dozen times since.”

Regardless, Luter emphasized that under his leadership there would be no room for racism or exclusivity. “If we stop appointing African-Americans, Asians, Hispanics to leadership positions after this, we’ve failed,” he said in a post-election news conference. “I promise you I’m going to do all that I can to make sure this is not just a one-and-done deal.”

The [Christian Post](#) noted that the SBC has made a concerted attempt to open its doors to minorities. “The convention has reached out to black, Hispanic, and Asian people in recent years,” it reported. “Over the last two decades, the percentage of non-Anglo SBC churches has grown from five percent to 20 percent.” A recent survey by [LifeWay](#), the SBC’s publishing arm, found that 86 percent of SBC clergy think the historic leadership shift will be a positive for the denomination.

In its report on Luter’s election, [CNN](#) recalled that the SBC “was founded by Southern slaveholders in 1845 after Northern Baptists opposed their desire to serve as missionaries. In recent years, the church has tried to shed that racist imprint, reaching out to minorities as both members and members of its clergy.” CNN noted that in “a watershed moment in 1995, during its 150th anniversary, the church issued a formal apology for its onetime support of slavery.”

In February, Luter told *Baptist Press News* that he felt that he needed to help the SBC get beyond its segregationist past and racist reputation. “It was not on my bucket list, so to speak,” he recalled, “but I think God ordained this because of the fact that what we’re dealing with right now through the convention is trying to make the convention diverse. I think this will speak not only to our convention but to our country and throughout the world that this convention is serious about reaching all people.”

In May, Luter told PBS that the SBC is ready for a new chapter that will fully embrace ethnic and racial diversity. “I have a past, you have a past, everybody has a past,” he told PBS. “This convention, unfortunately, has a past that we’re trying to move forward from, and that’s how I look at it. There was apology made, and so it’s now time to move on.”

Photo: Fred Luter, Pastor of the Franklin Ave. Baptist Church in New Orleans, right, reacts as he is elected president of the Southern Baptist Convention, at the convention in New Orleans.

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