

*Girls for the Gospel: Appealing to Remain Southern Baptist in a
Convention that Opposes Female Pastorship*

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Abstract: Reverend Linda Barnes Popham was finishing her third decade as senior pastor of Fern Creek Baptist Church in Louisville, Kentucky when the Credentials and Executive Committees of the Southern Baptist Convention removed her church from the organization in 2023. The Convention, the largest Protestant denomination in North America, had grappled with women’s roles in leadership for decades, though 2023 was the first year it began enforcing the exclusion of churches with female pastors. Its decision to remove churches with female pastors occurred in a climate rife with unaddressed racism and sexual abuse charges, as well as increased tension over the church and state’s stances on LGBTQ+ matters. As a pastor “more Southern Baptist than most,” Popham had to decide whether she would appeal the committee’s decisions on her church’s behalf at the organization’s annual meeting. Could she appeal to remain in an organization whose goals aligned with her own but did not recognize her as a worthy partner because of her very identity?

Introduction

On June 13, 2023, Reverend Linda Barnes Popham stood before thousands of messengers at the Southern Baptist Convention’s annual meeting to appeal for her church, Fern Creek Baptist Church, to remain in the convention (Jackson 2023). These messengers were her peers: leaders from churches across the United States who had collaborated with Fern Creek for decades and were now voting on its place in the denomination because it employed Popham as its senior pastor. For Popham, this appeal was the culmination of months of deliberation and correspondence with convention representatives—time that could have been spent performing any of the never-ending responsibilities associated with being the foremost leader in a community-centered church. Her church would continue to function as a doctrinally Baptist church regardless of the appeal’s outcome but stood to lose its ability to function as a denominationally Southern Baptist church, a designation which entails a voice in convention votes and cooperation in shared initiatives like missions programs, social services, and religious education. With cooperation at stake, Popham aimed to end her appeal on a note of solidarity: “And, in love, let’s take the gospel—together—to the ends of the earth!” (Popham 2023, 2) (See Appendix A).

Unfortunately, her microphone was cut off at the end of her allotted three minutes (Jackson 2023). Popham’s call to collective action and preceding questions about what had changed in Southern Baptist politics in the last few years remained unheard and unanswered. The messengers at the meeting “deemed [her church] to not be in friendly cooperation with the Southern Baptist Convention,” effectively removing it from the organization (Chandler 2023a, n.p.). The very next day, a preliminary proposal to amend governing articles to support formal opposition to female

ministers was approved by a two-thirds vote of attendees (Barkley 2023). Popham feared that the Southern Baptist Convention was estranging itself from not only Fern Creek Baptist Church but also the generations of women that would be impacted by such an amendment.

Fern Creek Baptist Church, where Popham pastors, is an approximately hundred-member, predominantly white church in Louisville, Kentucky, demographically and ideologically similar to many of the other churches in the Southern Baptist Convention. Popham, a white Alabaman in her late sixties who became a Christian at a young age, is a typical Southern Baptist pastor in every way but one: she is Fern Creek Baptist's *female* senior pastor. Leaders in the Southern Baptist Convention, the United States' largest Protestant denomination, have been divided over the place of women in ministry since the late 1970s, rewriting its official statement of faith in 2000 to stipulate that the office of pastor—the denomination's highest leadership position within a local church—was reserved for men. In the new millennium, church leaders grappled with debates surrounding homosexuality, racism, and abuse, shaping the fraught landscape in which Popham decided to appeal her church's ability to remain in the Convention.

The Southern Baptist Convention

The Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) refers to an organization of almost 50,000 Baptist churches in the United States whose purpose is “to provide a general organization for Baptists in the United States and its territories for the promotion of Christian missions at home and abroad and any other objects such as Christian education, benevolent enterprises, and social services” (SBC n.d.a., n.p.). Churches participate at the state and national levels by sending representatives, called messengers, to annual meetings and contributing to funds that maintain SBC programs for ministerial training, evangelistic trips (commonly termed “missions”), and religious literature. Between the SBC's annual meetings, an Executive Committee—consisting of the SBC president and secretary, the Woman's Missionary Union president, and elected messengers from different geographic regions—performs all financial and advisory work (SBC n.d.c.). Aside from sitting on the Executive Committee, the SBC president appoints committees that shape SBC programs and policy.

History and Hegemony

The history of the SBC is rooted in the institution of slavery, beginning from its founding in 1845. When northern Baptists in the Triennial Convention, an antebellum association of Baptist churches, refused to appoint slaveholders as missionaries, Baptist churches in the American South created the Southern Baptist Convention (Woods et al. 2018). A century and a half later and in response to the 1992 Los Angeles race riots, the SBC issued a formal apology to African Americans for its slaveholding past in 1995. In 2017, messengers at the annual meeting passed a resolution condemning white supremacy, though the SBC is yet to issue any racism-linked reparations (Crary 2020). The SBC's modern model of evangelism continues to feature a white, masculine hegemony that has been shaped by the interdependent forces of white supremacy and toxic masculinity (Gardner and Martí 2022).

Organized actions against racism and sexism in the SBC have been stymied by the Baptist tenet of congregational polity, in which every local church is autonomous in its operation and governance. That is, no level of the organization can assert any control over the congregational body beyond ceasing cooperation with it, a move known as disfellowshipping (Gardner and Martí 2022). Biblical inerrancy, the belief that the Christian Bible is without error in its teachings, is another major tenet of SBC values. Contemporary Southern Baptists oppose homosexuality,

abortion, and female pastors on the basis of biblical inerrancy and are typically socially and economically conservative (Shaw 2008). Although the denomination has faced dwindling membership since 2006, following a national trend of religious disengagement and disaffiliation, it remains powerful politically and socially because of its large membership (Shellnutt 2024).

Amending Amenability

Individual church adherence to official SBC stances has only been strictly enforced since February 2020, when the SBC's Executive Committee removed the first church for employing a lifetime registered sex offender as its pastor (Shellnutt 2024). Member churches of the SBC must fulfill a list of conditions listed in the SBC Constitution, the founding document of the SBC which codifies its governance and organizational structure (SBC n.d.d.). For the vast majority of SBC's history, financial contribution and broadly-defined "sympathy for its purpose and work" have been the only formal requirements, and neither have been tracked or enforced (SBC n.d.d, n.p.). Since 1992, however, the SBC has strengthened these requirements through amendments to its Constitution, which can be presented and voted upon at annual meetings; passage requires a two-thirds vote of the present messengers in two consecutive annual meetings.

SBC messengers have voted to pass constitutional amendments that disfellowship (i.e. remove from the organization) churches that affirm homosexuality, racism, and abuse. In 1993, the first of these amendments deemed churches that affirm homosexuality to "not to be in cooperation with the Convention" (Roach 2014, n.p.). Beginning in 2015, the SBC required cooperating churches to have a "faith and practice which closely identifies with the Convention's adopted statement of faith," which is called the Baptist Faith & Message (Collingsworth 2024, n.p.). In 2019, the SBC approved amendments to define friendly cooperation, a byword for the relationship between the SBC and member churches, as consistency with Convention beliefs on sexual abuse and discriminatory behavior on the basis of ethnicity (Toalston 2019). Three years later, Mike Law, senior pastor of a church in Virginia, recommended the Law Amendment to prevent churches with female pastors from cooperating with the SBC (Banks 2023).

To accompany the 2019 amendment and in response to growing concern over churches engaging in sexual abuse and discriminatory behavior, the SBC approved a shift in the existing Credentials Committee's oversight from messenger registration to inquiry and review of churches' cooperation—in short, to act as a form of accountability for SBC church leaders (Toalston 2019). To address such cases, the Credentials Committee would now have the power to recommend a church's disfellowship to the Executive Committee for a final decision (Toalston 2019). The Credentials Committee would also oversee a new method of appeal, in which a disfellowshipped church could present their case at the annual meeting for a vote by the convened messengers (SBC n.d.c.).

Faith and Feminism

Complementarianism is the view that women and men have fundamentally different but complementary roles, and the contemporary Southern Baptist viewpoint typically includes a submissive role for women in marriage and religious life (Kaylor 2010). This viewpoint solidified in the 1980s during an ideological conflict over women's roles that supporters called the Conservative Resurgence, deemed the Fundamentalist Takeover by critics (Morgan 2003). Before this time, the climate of the 1970s and early '80s had seemed favorable for supporting women in SBC clergy and leadership (Morgan 2003). Between 1971 and 1979, SBC messengers passed resolutions, which are non-action statements of the beliefs expressed at an annual meeting,

supporting the right to abortion in special circumstances such as rape, incest, fetal deformity, and “carefully ascertained evidence of the likelihood of damage to the emotional, mental, and physical health of the mother” (Shaw 2022; SBC 1971, n.p.). In 1980, 1981, and 1983, the SBC issued resolutions seeking “fairness for women in compensation, advancement, and opportunities for improvement” (SBC 1980, n.p.; SBC 1981; SBC 1983).

Conservative members believed that the SBC was becoming too liberal and convinced messengers that liberalism and biblical inerrancy were at odds with one another (Foust 2004). Led by Paige Patterson, an SBC pastor, and Paul Pressler, a Texan politician, they pursued and succeeded in a strategy of electing to office conservative SBC presidents who could then appoint conservative committee members to redirect SBC programs and policy (Foust 2004). In 1980, the SBC passed a resolution condemning abortion in all cases except when the life of the mother was at risk (SBC 1980). In 1984, it passed a resolution against women’s ordination (SBC 1984). After consecutive elections of conservative candidates for SBC president, moderates left the SBC to form the Alliance of Baptists and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship in 1987 and 1991, respectively (Morgan 2003). In 2000, messengers voted to revise the Baptist Faith & Message, the denomination’s statement of faith, to state that “the office of pastor/elder/overseer is limited to men as qualified by Scripture” (SBC n.d.b., n.p.).

Although SBC leaders do not have the authority to fire female pastors, leaders in many Southern Baptist churches have historically chosen not to ordain or hire female clergy. Addie Davis became the first woman ordained as a minister in a Southern Baptist church in 1964 and faced rejection after rejection from ministerial positions until she applied to the pastorship of a church of another Baptist denomination (Durso 2013). When Popham became pastor of Fern Creek in 1993, many congregants left because she was a woman (Lombroso forthcoming). Since 2023, the Credentials Committee has used the 2000 Baptist Faith & Message and 2015 amendment requiring identification with the Baptist Faith & Message to disfellowship churches with female pastors (NPR 2023). Because the US Supreme Court ruled in the 2012 *Hosanna-Tabor Evangelical Lutheran Church and School v. EEOC* case that the US Constitution supports ministerial exception—in which religious employers are protected from employee discrimination claims based on gender, race, age, and disability—female ministers have no legal recourse for the hiring discrimination that they face in SBC churches (Barrick 2020).

Missions to Ministry

Even before the legalization of ministerial exception, female leaders in the SBC rarely occupied leadership roles. The history of female leadership in the SBC began with the formation of the Woman’s Missionary Union (WMU). In 1887, the SBC’s annual meeting brought thousands of messengers to Louisville, KY (SBC 1887). The wives, sisters, mothers, and daughters of these messengers—who, until 1918, could only be male—coordinated their own meeting, establishing the Woman’s Missionary Union (Maxwell 2014). Although the WMU initially faced significant opposition from SBC leaders, members used the rhetoric of sisterhood and colonial paternalism—rebranded for female missionaries as spiritual motherhood—to gain support for their work (Maxwell 2014). Under the framework of spiritual motherhood, in which white female missionaries claimed to occupy nurturing roles in indigenous communities, the WMU transmuted the transgression of female leadership to the familiar ideal of maternal caregiving. Similarly, most female missionaries were single, and the women that took up financial offerings for them could arrange their support without infringing upon the male pastorship and traditional family unit. (Maxwell 2014).

The WMU created programs that shaped the experiences of generations of Southern Baptists. It collected offerings that supported countless female missionaries, including Lottie Moon and Annie Armstrong, arguably the most famous Southern Baptists of all time (Morgan 2003). SBC women authored, edited, and read magazines issued by the WMU, which promoted gender roles that ultimately reflected changing cultural norms in the twentieth century United States. These magazines defined the SBC woman's identity in terms of the prevailing social norms of the time. When women were leaving the workplace as men returned from war during the post-World War II 1950s, WMU magazines focused on the SBC woman's ability to cultivate influence in the home rather than outside of it (Maxwell 2014). Only a decade later, magazines during the second wave feminist movement of the 1960s—a period of feminist activity that advocated for the legal, economic, and social rights of women—called upon SBC women to assert activist sentiments inside and outside of the church. Finally, the WMU's leaders created children's and women's missions groups that empowered generations of female leaders, many of whom would step out of the missions sphere and become ministers (Bailey 2014).

Pastor Linda's Past

Linda Barnes Popham was born in Sheffield, Alabama in 1956 and spent her childhood there (Popham 2022) (See Appendix B). Alabama is part of the Bible Belt, a region of the southern US marked by the social prevalence of fundamentalist Protestantism (Jones 1977). In this region especially, the second wave feminist movement was inextricably intertwined with discussions of women's roles as defined by the church. Opponents of the movement cited passages of the Bible instructing women to submit to their husbands, while proponents argued that a "patriarchal church separated women from God" (Jones 1977, 34). Southern Christian women historically used the frameworks of motherhood and virtuous impact to advocate for temperance and, more rarely, abolition and civil rights, contending that the adverse effects of alcohol abuse, racism, and discrimination on the well-being and moral standing of a community and family made them women's issues (Chamberlain, Yanus, and Pyeatt 2016).

Sheffield is a part of the Shoals, an area of Northwestern Alabama that experienced record lows in white supremacy violence during racial integration and the civil rights struggle from 1945 to 1975 despite similar racial demographics to the rest of the state (Ouiros et al. n.d.). While the fewer instances of conflict may have been due to dependence upon federal funding, which the government threatened to withdraw from programs resisting racial integration, rather than a true community commitment to racial justice, the Sheffield of Popham's childhood was marked by many more interpersonal resolutions of segregation and discrimination cases than most cities in the southern United States. Popham carried the strength of these interpersonal connections and cooperative problem-solving methods with her throughout her work in ministry.

From a young age, Popham attended York Terrace Baptist Church, an SBC affiliate, where she engaged in many of the children's and young women's mission organizations that the WMU managed (Popham 2022) (See Appendix B). She became a Christian and was baptized in a public profession of her faith at 8 years old. Popham's very first act in the faith was to tell her friend Ann, and she "was privileged to lead her to know Jesus at a very early age" (Lombroso forthcoming, 5:25). Starting from that point, Popham felt "that passion was in [her] ... to share Christ" (Lombroso forthcoming, 5:36). The church leaders at York Terrace Baptist nurtured her desire to minister to others and "taught her to follow God's call at all costs" (Jackson 2023, n.p.). In 1972, at age 16, she began to serve on staff as a pianist. To Popham, the face of the SBC was not that of

an Executive Committee member deciding the fates of churches from afar, but that of a WMU member in her local church encouraging her to follow the call to serve, regardless of her gender.

Popham attended the University of North Alabama as a student in pharmacy (Our Staff n.d.). After her graduation, she served as a Minister of Music and Youth at Calvary Baptist Church in Tuscumbia, AL, another city in the Shoals area, fulfilling a more typically female ministerial role (Popham 2022). After several years of service at Calvary Baptist Church, Popham moved to Louisville, KY to attend the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, one of six SBC seminaries (Fern Creek Baptist Church n.d.). Although she earned a master's degree in church music there, Popham knew her call was to ministry and she would "end up in the pulpit" (Prather 2023).

Like many graduates, Popham would remain in the geographical region of her seminary and begin her long service at Fern Creek Baptist Church, a small but community-engaged church in Louisville, as again a Minister of Music and Youth in 1983 (Popham 2022). Following Dr. Mark Hopper's seven-year pastorship, Fern Creek Baptist employed Popham as Interim Pastor for nearly three years before officially ordaining her as Senior Pastor in 1993 (Popham 2022). It was also in Louisville that Popham met George Popham, an orthopedic surgeon from whom she would "inherit two step-sons and daughters-in-law" after their marriage in 2001 (Preach 2024 2024).

A Request for Reconsideration

On October 17, 2022, after Popham had served nearly 40 years at Fern Creek Baptist, the Southern Baptist Convention's Credentials Committee notified Popham that it had "received a request" to reconsider whether Fern Creek Baptist aligned with the SBC values listed in the Baptist Faith & Message (Credentials Committee 2022, 1) (See Appendix C). The committee allowed the church 30 days to respond to six questions regarding the church's history, leadership, and desire to remain affiliated with the SBC.

Popham and Fern Creek responded to the Credentials Committee with a 22-page document that included answers to each of the questions, a statement of unanimous support from the deacon body, and an excerpt from a book about biblical gender roles (Popham 2022) (See Appendix B). They listed the pastors of Fern Creek from its inception in 1954; Popham had served in the church in some capacity for four of its seven decades of existence, and as pastor for over three decades. In response to questions regarding the church's decision to retain a woman in a leadership position, Popham stated that Fern Creek followed the 1963 Baptist Faith & Message, which defined the church as "an autonomous body, operating through democratic processes under the Lordship of Jesus Christ" and contained no stipulations regarding a pastor's gender (2).

The response document listed numerous ways in which Fern Creek Baptist was in cooperation with the Southern Baptist Convention's goals of missions work, social services, and community engagement. Unlike many churches across the world, including other SBC members, Fern Creek remained in operation during the pandemic, continuing operations of its many community-based programs (Popham 2022). The church building houses a Filipino church, a Congolese church, and a child development center. Fern Creek partners with Sunrise Children's Services, a foster care and adoption program; Isaiah House, an addiction recovery program; and local homeless organizations. In keeping with the Great Commission, a series of commands in the Bible's New Testament to "teach all nations," the church maintains several mission organizations and organizes domestic and international mission trips, including ones to Southern Baptist churches with female pastors in Honduras and Liberia (King James Version 2006, 64; Matthew 28:19). Members of the church have served on SBC and Louisville Regional Baptist Association

committees. Fern Creek is the ninth highest financial contributor to the LRBA out of 155 churches in the area and contributed over \$10,000 to SBC funds in 2021 (Chandler 2023a).

The attached letter from the fellowship of deacons exemplified Fern Creek's view of female leadership and the support that Popham received from her church. Although deacons are typically male, Fern Creek has ordained female deacons since before Reverend Popham joined the church staff in 1983 (Chandler 2023b). These church leaders asserted that female subservience in scripture was more often the reflection of a lack of female rights in first-century biblical times than a holy mandate of gender hierarchy (Popham 2022). Towards this claim, they referenced the biblical use of male pronouns to refer to any singular person and the impetus of their position's establishment; women could legally own very few things in their own right, and thus "a woman who found herself a widow would be without support ... one of the reasons the office of Deacon was established in the first place!" (7). They strongly affirmed their pastor's calling, saying that it was evident through "her testimony, her manner of prayer, and ... observation of her not only in the worship setting, but also in common, everyday settings" (7).

The first chapter of *Woman: Who God Says She Is!* included in Fern Creek's response supported both the deacons' view of female leadership and Popham's calling. In the chapter, male author Dr. Eddie Lawrence relays his experience of Popham's commencement address to the University of North Alabama in the early 2000s (Lawrence 2007) (See Appendix B). Popham spoke about her experience as one of 40 female senior pastors in the 40,000 churches of the SBC and challenged the audience to "stop holding back the voices that wanted to spread the Good News" (28). As she looked across the audience of students and families gathered for a secular celebration, Popham recounted her call to ministry after graduating from the University of North Alabama. Lawrence applies a comparative framework, asking whether a man would have also used the commencement address to boldly proclaim the gospel in a secular setting and concluding that "regardless of what people thought about her right to be a Senior Pastor, they could not deny that she had a passion for people to know Jesus Christ" (29) (See Appendix B).

At the time of her commencement address to the University of North Alabama, Popham had already served at Fern Creek for nearly 20 years. The SBC had expressed support for Fern Creek during her pastorship; in 2013, during his tenure as the executive director of the Kentucky Baptist Convention, a statewide organization of churches affiliated with the SBC, the 2023 SBC missions president Paul Chitwood had spoken at Fern Creek Baptist (Culledge 2024). Fern Creek's response to the Credentials Committee repeated one crucial question: why was the Credentials Committee investigating the church as Popham was finishing her fourth decade of pastorship?

Social Movements and Churches that Appealed

As the Credentials Committee considered Fern Creek Baptist for removal in 2022, they were also in the process of investigating Freedom Church and Saddleback Church for employing a pastor with a history of sexual misconduct and for employing female pastors, respectively (Culledge 2024). Although a total of six churches would be disfellowshipped in February 2023, only the pastors and/or deacons at Freedom Church, Saddleback Church, and Fern Creek Baptist Church would choose to appeal the decision at the June 2023 annual meeting of SBC messengers in New Orleans (Chandler 2023a). The SBC's mishandling of abuse cases and Saddleback Church's fame featured prominently in interpretations of the Credential Committee's timing (See Appendix D). Analyzing the media's portrayal of the three churches and their leaders sheds light on the atmosphere of the time. Media exposure on a theological debate between the SBC and an internationally recognized church seemed to be an opportune escape from the main reason that the

SBC had been in news headlines since 2018: turning a blind eye to and even concealing sexual abuse in the church.

Freedom Church: Addressing and Appealing Abuse

As a greater investigation of the SBC's concealment of abuse cases unfolded across the nation, the Credentials Committee was repurposed in 2019 to provide accountability for individual SBC churches as a direct result of distrust towards the SBC from inside and outside of the organization. Freedom Church in Vero Beach, FL was the sixth church that the repurposed committee recommended for disfellowship on the grounds of employing sex offenders (Schroeder 2020, Chandler 2021). Between 2021 and 2022, Freedom Church appointed Richard Demsick as its senior pastor (Cockes 2023). Demsick had "admitted to a pattern of sexual misconduct with women who were under his pastoral care and supervision," a background at odds with his continued employment as a pastor (Cockes 2023, n.p.). Demsick, unfortunately, was far from the only pastor whose predatory behavior had been purposefully overlooked by the SBC.

The #MeToo movement, a sexual abuse, harassment, and rape culture awareness campaign that began in the American film industry, did not leave churches untouched: with #ChurchToo and #SilenceIsNotSpiritual, numerous abuse survivors of various gender identities have shared their experiences of sexual and domestic abuse in or hidden by the church (Griswold 2018). Both Patterson and Pressler, architects of the conservative ideological shift of the 1980s, were implicated. In 2017, Duane Rollins accused Pressler of sexual abusing him for several decades, beginning from when Rollins was 14 and Pressler's Bible study student (Platoff 2017). In 2018, Patterson, who had since become a seminary president, was fired for advising two female seminary students who had come to him with rape allegations in 2003 to keep silent (Shellnutt 2018). Although cases against Catholic priests in schools and churches had proliferated in the news and courts since the 1990s, the spotlight did not land on the SBC until a groundbreaking 2018 exposé series by *The Houston Chronicle*—in response to Rollins's claims—found that hundreds of Southern Baptist leaders and volunteers have been known and charged sex offenders—and that Convention leaders had concealed their crimes from their congregations (Tedesco 2019).

SBC leaders had repeatedly ignored the warnings of Christa Brown, an SBC abuse survivor and activist. Over the course of nearly two decades, Brown had contacted multiple SBC leaders to warn them about Baptist pastors who were sexual predators, to no avail (Allen 2019). As the Department of Justice launched an official investigation into the SBC in 2022, SBC members would have to reckon with their handling of abuse and predation (Smietana 2022).

Critics argued that the SBC's publicized focus on female pastors was an attempt to redirect attention from its abuse mishandlings, though the issues were already connected in the public eye. The Credential Committee's slow investigation of sexual abuse cases 2019–2022—only 30 sexual abuse allegations processed despite *The Houston Chronicle*'s accusation of greater than three hundred leaders—and its abrupt turn in 2023 to scrutinizing churches with female pastors hardly seemed like a sincere effort by the SBC to deal with abuse-related corruption (Shellnutt 2022). Sexual abuse-related motions at the 2018 Convention were accompanied by a motion to examine the biblical position of a woman serving as president of the SBC, and #MeToo protestors just outside held signs not only for abuse survivors, but also for women pastors like Popham: one read "Calling Women to Preach Since the First Easter Morning" (Griswold 2018, n.p.).

Saddleback Church: Saddled with Salience

From the beginning, Saddleback's size gave it much more media exposure than Fern Creek. On May 6, 2021, Saddleback Church ordained Liz Puffer as pastor of pastoral care, Cynthia Petty as NextGen ministries pastor, and Katie Edwards as student ministries pastor (Schroeder and Barkley 2021). All three women had already been involved in ministerial work at Saddleback, with over 70 years of combined service. The church's Facebook page described the ordination service as "a historic night," and Petty responded in an interview that "this change in philosophy for women in ministry was revolutionary" (Saddleback Church 2021, n.p.; Lea 2021, n.p.).

Unlike the SBC, which has faced declining member and church numbers since the early 1980s, Saddleback has grown from a single church of 200 people in 1980 to one of the largest in the Convention, with greater than 50,000 members and 19 campuses (Lea 2021). Its founder and former pastor Rick Warren is the author of *The Purpose-Driven Life*, which has sold over 50 million copies in 137 languages (Editors of the Encyclopaedia Britannica n.d.). Warren's decision in May 2021 to ordain three female ministers as pastors at Saddleback was followed by his September retirement and appointment of a couple, Andy and Stacie Wood, as senior and teaching pastor, respectively.

In many ways, Warren and Saddleback embody Southern Baptist personal charisma and evangelism. Warren's international celebrity and Saddleback's size gave the church a much larger platform as its cooperation with the SBC came under the Credential Committee's consideration. The 2022 Convention, at which Mike Law proposed the Law Amendment to formally bar churches with female pastors from the SBC, took place in Anaheim, CA, where 90 of the 149 of the Southern Baptist churches in the county were started by Saddleback Church (Burk 2022). Based on messengers' positive reception of the Law Amendment, Warren's speech to the Convention in June 2022 suggested that he knew a parting was unwanted but imminent. He urged the messengers in attendance to "make a resolution that Baptists take the next 10 years to finish the task of the Great Commission in our generation" because this would likely be his last convention (Burk 2022, n.p.).

As the issue of SBC expulsion arose, a major difference between Saddleback and Fern Creek lay in the gender of the churches' decision makers and spokespeople. Because Warren and Andy Wood, both male, were the Saddleback pastors who appointed female pastors and chose to appeal disfellowship, SBC media was able to maintain a complementarian approach to Puffer, Petty, and Edwards, the female pastors in question. In short, their coverage was extremely limited and what coverage existed was restricted to their roles as wives and mothers. Warren's speech mentioned only one woman—his wife, Kay—and did not mention his own church's new female pastors by name or otherwise (Burk 2022). A Baptist Press article on the ordination, one of only two to mention Puffer, Petty, and Edwards by name, described the debate as being "played out over Mother's Day weekend, largely on social media," connecting a decision about female leadership to a celebration of motherhood (Schroeder and Barkley 2021, n.p.). Popham, on the other hand, disrupted the SBC's patriarchal leadership by being not only the reason for her church's disfellowship but also the point of contact for any inquiry into her decisions for Fern Creek's path forward.

The Road to New Orleans

Congregational Confirmation

Between the October 2022 request and February 2023 disfellowship, Popham and Fern Creek deacons met on Zoom with members of the Credentials Committee on January 9, 2023 to plead their case and avoid immediate disfellowship (Popham 2024). In less than a month, a

physical letter arrived in Fern Creek’s mailbox. Although it was filled with so many grammatical mistakes that the secretary of the Credentials Committee had to resend a corrected version by email, its message was clear. The Credentials Committee would recommend Fern Creek Baptist Church to the Executive Committee for removal from the Southern Baptist Convention on its February 21 meeting (Credentials Committee 2023) (See Appendix E). If the Executive Committee deemed Fern Creek to not be in cooperation with the SBC, the church would have until May 14, 2023 to appeal the decision. Otherwise, the church would face disfellowship.

Popham struggled with feelings of culpability in the event of a possible removal—how could she decide to appeal a potential removal on behalf of her church when her leadership was in question? While she never doubted her sincere calling and “knew that she had a message,” Fern Creek’s eviction would relate directly to her leadership and identity (CNN 2023, n.p.). In the spring of 2023, Fern Creek deacons organized a vote at a weekly Sunday evening service to determine whether the congregation wanted to retain Popham, who congregants affectionally refer to as “Pastor Linda” (Popham 2022) (See Appendix B). Popham wholeheartedly supported the vote, describing her desire to support the church’s best interests:

I will do nothing to hurt the church. If you need to stay Southern Baptist and I need to leave, I will walk out. (CNN 2023, n.p.)

Popham, however, did not even need to walk out of the room; with the deacons’ encouragement, she opened the ballot before her congregation. Each one affirmed her leadership and the congregation’s desire to continue to support her; members at Fern Creek Baptist Church had voted unanimously in favor of retaining Popham. If the SBC Executive Committee chose to disfellowship Fern Creek for its employment of Popham as its female senior pastor, its congregants would stand behind her completely.

Disfellowship and Deliberation

Although Popham had assumed that her church would receive some sort of notice regarding the Executive Committee’s decision, her first notification was “at 4 o’clock on Tuesday [February 21] from a reporter in Nashville wanting to know [her] reaction” (NPR 2023). The February 21 Baptist Press release reported that the Executive Committee had voted to expel Fern Creek Baptist—along with Saddleback Church in Lake Forest, CA; New Faith Mission Ministry in Griffin, GA; St. Timothy’s Christian Baptist Church in Baltimore, MD; Calvary Baptist Church in Jackson, MS; and Freedom Church in Vero Beach, FL (Chandler 2023a). Besides Freedom Church, which employed a pastor with a history of sexual misconduct, all churches named in the press release employed female pastors. Whereas Fern Creek Baptist’s deacons had been involved in previous dealings, all communications between Fern Creek and the SBC thereafter involved Reverend Popham directly calling the Executive Committee office with questions and requests for information (Popham 2024). Reassured of her church’s staunch approval, Popham knew that it was up to her alone to interpret the Executive Community’s responses and decide whether to appeal the disfellowship.

Popham paralleled the disfellowship to “being kicked out of the family” (Chandler 2023b, n.p.). Fern Creek Baptist operated all of the SBC programs that Popham grew up with and relied on the partnership to gain access to the corresponding religious-education curricula (Chandler 2023b). The church viewed SBC cooperation as an opportunity to contribute to missions work, and Popham and other church leaders were proud of its commitment to engagement in the

community and Convention (Chandler 2023b). With her church's support behind her, why would a female pastor in Popham's position choose not to appeal?

Churches' Choices

Of the other churches named in the release, it became clear by March 1 that New Faith Mission Ministry, St. Timothy's Christian Church, and Calvary Baptist Church would not appeal. All three churches are situated in predominantly Black inner-city neighborhoods located in Atlanta, Baltimore, and Jackson, respectively. New Faith and St. Timothy's both employ Black women pastors; while Calvary Baptist does not, half of the staff is Black (Calvary for Jackson n.d.).

Pastor Gwennette Watson at New Faith Mission Ministry was shocked to learn of her church's disaffiliation. The church is non-denominational and has never been affiliated with the SBC. In Watson's own words, "they can't disaffiliate from something that they never were affiliated with from the beginning" (Rawlins 2023, n.p.). The Reverend Minnie R. Washington of St. Timothy's Christian Baptist Church responded similarly—the church has had no relationship with the SBC, and Washington views the ouster as "an honor and a privilege" (Coleman 2023, n.p.). She said that the individuals involved in the decision should "remember that their first preacher-teacher was their mother" (Coleman 2023, n.p.). Finally, Calvary Baptist Church Pastor Linda Smith stated that her church was an SBC affiliate but would not appeal the decision, instead continuing to focus on ministry in their community (Bharath and Smith 2023). The response document and Zoom meeting took time that Popham had already chosen to dedicate to communicating with the SBC. Appealing in person in New Orleans would be a further investment of more time and money into an organization that showed no signs of valuing her presence.

If Fern Creek, Freedom, and Saddleback chose to appeal, they would be the first in the denomination's history to do so. Moreover, with Rick Warren spearheading Saddleback's message to the SBC and on social media and Donald Stewart, a leader at Freedom Church, appealing its expulsion, Reverend Popham would be the first female senior pastor to formally appeal her church's disfellowship (Cockes 2023). Her decision would determine whether the court of public opinion—a vote by messengers from SBC affiliated churches around the country at the next annual meeting—would be called to action.

Agreeing to Appeal

Popham characterizes herself as "more Southern Baptist than most" because of Fern Creek's maintenance of SBC and WMU programs and her own conservatism (Chandler 2023b, n.p.). Unlike the pastors of New Faith Mission Ministry, St. Timothy's Christian Church, and Calvary Baptist Church, many of Popham's cultural values aligned with that of the SBC. Of the Fern Creek members that left after her ordination, there were those who left because she was a woman, but also those who left "because they felt [she] was too conservative" (Lombroso forthcoming, 4:32). Although she "wants to see Southern Baptists raise up other women to answer God's call," she is not a self-described feminist (Chandler 2023b, n.p.; Lombroso forthcoming). Popham does not see herself as a champion for women's rights:

[She] just felt like God was calling [her] to do what [she] was doing and people would see that and that quality would help change people. (Lombroso forthcoming, 5:39)

However, Popham chose to appeal because of the SBC's evangelistic efforts and Fern Creek's involvement in the WMU (Chandler 2023b). While she might not have seen herself as a champion, Popham spoke of a need to advocate for Southern Baptist women in an interview with SBC representatives:

We feel like the average Southern Baptist would have no problem with [the employment of female pastors]. The other reason is to be a change agent for women in the Southern Baptist Convention—for all those young girls, for all those young people God is calling into ministry (Chandler 2023b, n.p.).

After Popham decided to represent Fern Creek Baptist Church and appeal, she traveled with several deacons to New Orleans, site of the 2023 SBC Annual Meeting (SBC 2023). On Tuesday, June 13, the first day of the two-day meeting, Popham prepared to mount a defense of her values, leadership decisions, and right to continue in partnership with the SBC before thousands of messengers from churches across the country. She would only have three minutes of the 30 slotted for “miscellaneous business” in the meeting's schedule to read the passionate speech that she had painstakingly typed and retyped beforehand (SBC 2023, 54).

Popham spoke about unnecessary division over what she saw as a small issue, remarking that, while Fern Creek disagreed with views held by some other churches in the SBC, they still desired to “partner with [them] in proclaiming Jesus Christ to the world” (Popham 2023, 1) (See Appendix A). She referenced various passages of scripture regarding cooperation and the hypocrisy of religious leadership and would have shared that a member of the Credentials Committee had called her in 2020 to inform her that Fern Creek Baptist Church had been found under investigation to be in friendly cooperation with the SBC (NPR 2023, Popham 2023). However, before she could question the timing and politics of her church's removal, Popham was interrupted unceremoniously by a timekeeper and the rise of conversation in the audience (Jackson 2023). Instead of ending on a note of optimism and cooperation, Popham's speech ended with descriptions of “deeds done in darkness,” partially drowned out by audience chatter and overlaid with a light smattering of applause from the members of her congregation in attendance and a few messengers (Jackson 2023, n.p.).

When Popham sat down, a Texan woman brought her crying daughter to speak to her (Bennett 2023). Lottie, a fourteen-year-old, had been raised in Southern Baptist life and said that she had been called to ministry three years ago. As Popham hugged Lottie, she assured her that Fern Creek would gladly take her on as an intern and mentor her in the future. “Wherever [Fern Creek] might be as a church at that time,” Popham promised, it would be certain to continue to support women and girls like Lottie (Bennett 2023, n.p.).

While Fern Creek and Popham may have made such a commitment, SBC leaders and messengers seemed to have made the opposite. Messengers—of which greater than 30% were women—voted 9 to 1 to expel Fern Creek (Baptist Press Staff 2023). The next day, the first of two votes on the Law Amendment surpassed the two-thirds voting requirement (SBC 2023, 90). Three months later, the Kentucky Baptist Convention also voted to disfellowship Fern Creek (WAVE News 2023).

Before any of these blows, a male messenger had approached Popham on Monday evening to ask her to vote in favor of the Law Amendment (Dias and Graham 2023). Taking him by the hand, Popham replied: “We could be great partners in the gospel. What are you going to do when we enter the gates of heaven together?” (Dias and Graham 2023, n.p.).

Conclusion

Reverend Linda Barnes Popham's case centers around her choice to appeal the Southern Baptist Convention's decision to disfellowship Fern Creek Baptist Church because it employed Popham as its senior female pastor. The SBC's history with racism, women's roles, and sexual abuse contextualizes the timing of Fern Creek's disfellowship and highlights questions about intersectionality and organizational leadership. What are the costs and benefits of belonging to a national organization? How does a leader's identity relate to their community's values? Should ministerial exception be protected by law? Leaders like Popham must make decisions that not only impact their local communities but also become precedent for people with shared backgrounds.

Epilogue

The Southern Baptist Convention continues to wield significant influence. Its endorsement of political candidates—including hosting President Donald Trump as an online speaker at the 2024 annual meeting—is not only an indicator of the voting trends of its twelve million members, but also those of other Protestant denominations (Thorp 2024). In addition to passing a resolution at the same meeting stating its opposition to in vitro fertilization (IVF), the SBC's affiliated Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission urged lawmakers to vote against the IVF Protection Act (Thorp 2024). Although memberships are still in decline, it spent nearly \$800 million on missions in 2023, a 9% increase from the previous year (Shellnutt 2024). These funds finance organization of new churches in the United States, sending of missionaries to 185 countries, and many of the programs encouraging young people to engage in missions and ministry that had succeeded in encouraging a sixteen-year-old Linda Barnes Popham to pursue a life ministering to others (IMB n.d.).

Although Popham has dealt with “surprise, sadness, [and] anger” since the SBC's decision, she still feels optimism for Fern Creek and her own ministry (Prather 2023, n.p.). She says that “the church will have to find new literature, but for the most part, things won't look much different” (WAVE News 2023, n.p.). Popham continues to preach sermons on Sundays and administer many of the same programs that Fern Creek had managed at the time of the Credentials Committee's investigation (Fern Creek Baptist Church n.d.). Fern Creek is still open to hiring interns—including women who are called to become pastors (L. Popham, personal communication, May 7, 2024)¹. In the spring of 2024, Popham and several members of Fern Creek travelled internationally to pursue missions work (L. Popham, personal communication, May 7, 2024). In March 2024, three months before the SBC's annual meeting, Popham spoke at Preach 2024, a conference for pastors hosted by the Augusta Baptist Association of Virginia (Preach 2024 2024). Whatever new decisions the SBC would make, Popham and Fern Creek would continue to live out their own faith and calling in their community.

When a Virginia church's male senior pastor appealed for his church to not be disfellowshipped from the SBC for its support of female pastors at the 2024 annual meeting, Popham and members of Fern Creek were not in attendance (Roach 2024). When the second necessary two-thirds vote in favor of the Law Amendment narrowly failed, Popham learned of the ruling with “hollow relief” from a friend's call (Karthikeyan 2024, n.p.). The convention was no longer the family she had known since childhood.

¹ I interviewed Reverend Popham over a phone call on May 7, 2024 after my IRB application was approved. She gave me permission to share the documents that had been given to me for reference, directed me to the *Hold the Line* documentary, and stated that her schedule would be busy because of missions work. Once she learned that said that I was a Southern Baptist woman, she told me that Fern Creek would be open to hiring me if I ever felt a call to ministry.

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Appendix A: Fern Creek Baptist Appeal (Popham 2023)

Appeal from Fern Creek Baptist Church

Louisville, Kentucky

Pastor Linda Barnes Popham

June 13, 2023

Fern Creek Baptist Church was birthed as a Southern Baptist Church on October 24, 1954, nearly 70 years ago. FCBC is a very conservative, evangelical, mission-minded, Great Commission church like many of you. We know that Jesus is the only way to the Father. We believe that the Bible is God's perfect Word. We, also, believe that the Spirit gives illumination to our minds; therefore, we don't all interpret every passage the same. We believe that the Bible allows women to serve in ways in which all of you do not agree. That's ok. But, we should still be able to partner together as the prophet said by enlarging the place of our tent and lengthening our cords.

I have been a Southern Baptist my entire life – giving my life to Jesus as an eight-year-old child in my home church of York Terrace Baptist in Sheffield, Alabama where I was taught to love Jesus, follow Jesus wherever He might lead, to share the gospel, and to be a student of His Word. I have served for over 51 consecutive years on the staff of Southern Baptist churches beginning at age 16. I have served FCBC for over 40 years, the last 33 as first Interim Pastor and then Pastor. So, why now?

We are not here to seek to convince any of you to call women as pastors of your churches. We disagree with some of you and your faith practices – especially extreme Calvinists. But, FCBC doesn't want to kick you out of the family. Our desire has been to partner with you in proclaiming Jesus Christ to the world.

The Southern Baptists who mentored me were “all about Jesus” and upheld the tenets of the priesthood of the believers and the autonomy of the local church. They viewed the Baptist Faith and Message as a confession, not a creed. FCBC affirms the 1963 BFM. We have a faith and practice which identifies more closely with the BFM than many other SBC churches. I, personally, am more conservative than most Baptist pastors I know.

Satan loves dividing us. He is tearing this convention apart. He loves all those deeds done in darkness. He loves seeing religious leaders sitting on protected and padded pontifical thrones, being consumed by tradition, opinions, power, and non-salvific issues. There are millions of people groping in darkness, needing to know the good news of Jesus Christ, while some are working in the shadows, seeking political power, covering up sexual offenses, and diverting attention away from what they are doing by trying to silence the voices of faithful churches – and even doing it through unbiblical methods. And I sadly quote words from Jesus Himself as spoke to the religious leaders, “*Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You have neglected the more important matters.*”

Hypocrisy is rampant among us. A couple of years ago, when contacted by the Credentials Committee for the first time, they deemed us in friendly cooperation with the SBC. But, their spokesperson who made the call to me told me not to tell anyone. But today the whole convention needs to hear the truth. What changed in SBC politics in the last few years? What is going on?

Who “pulls the strings” now?

Jesus said, “*By this shall all people know that you are my disciples, by the love that you show to one another.*” They’ll know we are Christians by our love. Think of all the people who would come to know Jesus Christ if all Southern Baptists showed love to one another! Let’s love one another! Let’s love like Jesus! And, in love, let’s take the gospel – together – to the ends of the earth!

Appendix B: Response to Credentials Committee (Popham 2022)

To: Credentials Committee, Southern Baptist Convention

From: Linda Barnes Popham, Pastor of Fern Creek Baptist Church The answers to your

questions are as follows:

1. Has the church historically retained a man, as qualified by scripture, as its pastor, bishop, elder or overseer? Please explain.

The pastors who have served Fern Creek Baptist Church are as follows:

Pastors

Rev. Harold Sangster Rev. John Emert
Dr. Allen Graves (Interim) Rev. William D. Sanders Dr.
Wayne Ward (Interim) Rev. Roy Lamberth
Rev. Don Atkinson

Rev. Don Letzring
Dr. Russell Bennett (Interim)
Rev. Bill Rogers (Interim)
Rev. Tom Bloxam
Rev. Jim Willmoth
Dr. Harold Songer (Interim)

Dr. Jack McEwen (Interim) Dr. Mark Hopper
Rev. Linda Barnes Popham Minister of Music and Youth
Interim Pastor
Pastor

Years of Service

October 24, 1954-June 1956
June 20, 1956-June 1959
August 23, 1959- May 1, 1960
May 1, 1960- November 11, 1967
November 1967- March 1968
May 26, 1968 - March 14, 1971
September 5, 1971- Feb. 14, 1975
April 4, 1982- May 1, 1983
July 13, 1975- January 31, 1977
March 1977- September 1977
November 1977- March 1978
April 1978- October 1978
May 1978- August 1980
September 1980 - February 15, 1981
October 4, 1981- February 7, 1982
February 22, 1981-Sept. 20, 1981
September 4, 1983- July 1990

March 1, 1983 - August 1990
August 1990 - April 1993 April 1993 - present

2. Does the church currently retain, as its pastor, bishop, elder or overseer, a man as qualified by Scripture? If no, please explain the church's decision.

We obviously interpret scripture referring to women in ministry differently than some others in Baptist life. As stated in the 1963 Baptist Faith and Message, *"The criterion by which the Bible is to be interpreted is Jesus Christ."*¹¹ We are happy to meet with you to further discuss how we feel Jesus has led us to this interpretation.

3. The Convention's adopted statement of faith, the *Baptist Faith & Message* 2000, Article VI. The Church, reads as follows:

...While both men and women are gifted for service in the church, the office of pastor is limited to men as qualified by Scripture.

Please help our committee understand how your church's beliefs closely identify with the Convention's beliefs specifically regarding the *Baptist Faith & Message*, Article VI. The Church.

We adhere to the 1963 Baptist Faith and Message. Article VI - The Church - says: *A New Testament church of the Lord Jesus Christ is a local body of baptized believers who are associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the gospel, observing the two ordinances of Christ, committed to His teachings, exercising the gifts, rights, and privileges invested in them by His Word, and seeking to extend the gospel to the ends of the earth.*

This church is an autonomous body, operating through democratic processes under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. In such a congregation members are equally responsible. Its Scriptural officers are pastors and deacons.

The New Testament speaks also of the church as the body of Christ which includes all of the redeemed of all the ages.

4. On occasion, a church makes the decision to no longer identify with the Southern Baptist Convention as a "Cooperating church" and chooses to discontinue its relationship, unbeknownst to us. Does Fern Creek Baptist Church desire be in cooperation with the Southern Baptist Convention?

Fern Creek Baptist Church desires to be in cooperation with the Southern Baptist Convention. We are in greater cooperation with the SBC than many of the churches in the convention. The following statements exemplify some of the ways we are in friendly cooperation:

- Our mission statement is:
REACHING UP...to God with an open heart and faithful obedience in response to His call; REACHING IN...to our church fellowship to grow and serve together in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ; REACHING OUT...to the whole world by sharing the gospel through the power of the Holy Spirit.

- Our church covenant states: *As members of Fern Creek Baptist Church who have accepted Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, we do joyfully enter into covenant with one another as one body in Christ. We will, by leadership of the Holy Spirit, love the Lord our God with all our heart and with all our soul and with all our strength and with all our mind and love our neighbor as ourselves. We will be faithful in living according to God's Word and seek to follow the example of our Lord Jesus Christ.*
- The gospel is boldly proclaimed at FCBC. We are "all about the gospel" and seek to be in the center of God's will. We love Jesus and people!
- We are a Great Commission church.
- We seek to be a church like the one described in Acts 2:42-47.
- Baptisms are held frequently as people accept Christ.
- FCBC participates in the evangelistic endeavors of our state convention and association. We are currently participating in *The Gospel to Every Home* and have already visited more than 4,000 homes.
- We, also, reach out to our community with the gospel through the GROW program, evangelistic events such as block parties, children's activities.
- When most of the churches in our association closed their doors during the pandemic, FCBC never closed her doors.
- Our youth participate in our Kentucky Crossings Camps at Cedarmore and Jonathan Creek.
- FCBC is one of the few churches in our association who continue to offer mission organizations (WMU, Acteens, Challengers, Girls in Action, Royal Ambassadors, and Mission Friends).
- At the invitation of our association, FCBC launched a Ministry and Missions Center in 1997 which shares the gospel to this present day by meeting the needs of our community in tangible ways.
- We recently ordained two people to the gospel ministry.
- We minister regularly to the homeless. Several of them have accepted Christ during the past couple of years.
- FCBC offers annual international mission trips. Our pastor leads many of the teams.

- FCBC partners with other churches in our association in participating in local, state, and North American mission trips.
- We partner with two churches with whom we allow to share our space: International Christian Fellowship of Louisville (Filipino Church) and the Fire Evangelism Mission Church (Congolese Church).
- We are active in the Fern Creek/ Highview United Ministries.
- We have two non-profit Christian organizations housed in our building: Kendall Optical Ministry and Children of the Soil.
- We have a weekday Child Development Center which honors Jesus.
- The following people in leadership in our state convention and association have preached or spoken at FCBC in the last ten years: the late Bill Mackey, the late Wesley Pitts, Russell Bennett, Paul Chitwood, Dale Suttles, Chuck McAlister, Todd Robertson, Steve Thompson, Jim Cordell, Kenny Rager, Rob Patterson, Ralph Neal, Joy Bolton, Linda Cooper, Susan Bryant, Pat Reaves, Roger Palmer, Doug Strader, Rick Pryor (on behalf of Todd Gray), Jason Stewart, Larry Gritton, Alan Witham, many missionaries, etc. We think it is important that our church gets to know her denominational leaders.
- We have a close relationship with Sunrise Children's Services (formerly Kentucky Baptist Homes for Children). We had the privilege of baptizing a couple of the boys a few years ago.
- We partner with Isaiah House in helping people with addiction recovery.
- We partner with Baptist Medical & Dental Mission International, an independent Baptist organization which mainly consists of Southern Baptists. Linda Popham has served for twelve years on the board of BMDMI and was recently on the search committee to find the new President of BMDMI.
- We cooperate with our association in the following ways:
 - FCBC is the ninth highest financial contributor (out of approximately 155 churches) to the Louisville Regional Baptist Association.
 - FCBC has members who serve on committees and the executive board of LRBA: Renee Bryant, Jodie Towles, Melissa Logsdon- Young, and George Popham. Others have served previously.

- o Linda Popham has served on the following committees in recent years: Ministry and Missions, Personnel, Nominating, Evangelism, Search Committee for the DOM, etc.
- o Linda served as Assistant Moderator (2015-2016) and Moderator (2016-2017).
- o We faithfully send a full slate of messengers to our annual meetings. Out of 74 people who attended (on the day you sent this letter), ten of those were members of FCBC.
- We cooperate with our state convention in the following ways:
 - o We faithfully send messengers to the annual meetings. Only five attended this past Tuesday; however, we usually take more.
 - o We are active with Kentucky Woman's Missionary Union.
 - o Our children and youth are active in the state music events.
 - o Some of the ways Linda Popham has served the convention are: Committee on Nominations (2002-2004), Kentucky Ethics League (1998-2004), etc.

We share these facts with you not for accolades of praise, but for you to realize that there are many more ways that we are in friendly cooperation than ways we are not. Again, we are in friendlier cooperation with the SBC than many of the churches in the SBC. If our convention continues to make "minor things" the "main thing", there will soon not be many churches left in the convention.

5. Would a representative of the church like to request a meeting to discuss this matter?

Pastor Linda Barnes Popham, her husband, and deacon representatives of the church request a meeting with your committee.

6. Has the church been contacted by the local Baptist association or state convention regarding this matter? If yes, please explain.

Todd Robertson, Associational Mission Strategist of Louisville Regional Baptist Association, and Todd Gray, Executive Director of the Kentucky Baptist Convention, received a copy of your email. We have discussed this issue at various times.

Other Comments:

- We are greatly concerned that whoever has issues with our church and our pastor did not come to us directly. The person(s) obviously violated Matthew 18 by not coming to us first. Therefore, this process is actually unbiblical.
- The issue of women pastors should be a second or third tier issue. There are practices in many churches with which we do not agree; however, we believe in the autonomy of the local church and the priesthood of believers. If you want examples, we can give those to you.
- We find it hypocritical that many of the same people who were mentioned in the SBC sexual abuse report are some of the same men who have led the "campaign" against women in ministry.
- We have not regularly sent messengers to the SBC annual meeting in recent years because of where Vacation Bible School fits in our church schedule. VBS is a high priority for us.
- There are women who are pastors of Southern Baptist churches in other countries. Our pastor has been invited to preach in one in Honduras and one in Liberia.
- Who are we to question God's call?
- I (Linda) am so grateful to have grown up in York Terrace Baptist Church in Sheffield, Alabama. The church leaders taught me to follow God's call at all costs. I began serving on staff as pianist at age 16. Because of God's call I changed from pursuing a degree in pharmacy to being open to whatever His will was. God called me to Calvary Baptist Church in Tuscumbia, Alabama after graduating from college. After serving as a Minister of Music and Youth in Alabama and here at FCBC, God's call has been clear. And now after 50 years of serving on the staff of Southern Baptist Churches God's call has not changed. My passion in ministry is to tell other people about Jesus so they can know our Savior, too!
- After the Addendum from the deacons, please see chapter one from the book: *"Woman: Who God Says She Is!"* I was surprised a few years ago when someone gave me this book by Dr. Eddie Lawrence. I hope you will find it helpful. You may wish to begin reading on page 25 if you don't want to read the entire chapter.

To: Credentials Committee, SBC

From: Fellowship of Deacons, Fern Creek Baptist Church

It has come to our attention that you have members of Committee or Convention leadership that believe that we are not "in friendly cooperation" with the SBC. The body of Deacons is in unanimous agreement for the following statements:

It is our belief and observation, that there are pastors who are serving who do not exhibit a calling as strongly as Pastor Linda does. In fact, if you study the life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, you will find he was a "Vocational" Pastor before becoming a "Spiritual" Pastor.

The present crisis in the Convention concerning sexual malfeasance in the clergy is evidence that there are pastors who do not have, or have turned from, the calling of the Holy Spirit.

Pastor Linda Barnes Popham's life gives evidence of the calling of the Holy Spirit to serve as the called Pastor of Fern Creek Baptist Church. It is evident to us through her testimony, her manner of prayer, and our observation of her not only in the worship setting, but also in common, everyday settings. Her calling was laid upon her at a very young age. Her genuine calling has not diminished with time.

The Baptist Faith and Message 2000 limits the office of Pastor to men. This prohibition is NOT present in the Baptist Faith and Message 1963, in which we abide. Our Pastor is a female, as are several of our Deacons.

The limitation to males in BF&M 2000 is based on historical common language and culture of the time of Christ. In this time, women were considered by society as non-entities, and in some cultures, property. Women were allowed no leadership roles in government, or other organizations. As a matter of fact, a woman who found herself a widow, would be without support...one of the reasons the office of Deacon was established in the first place! (Acts chapter 6)

In common language, both then and today, the male pronoun is used to represent "persons". For example,

- 1 John 3:1- KJV: Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be **called the sons** of God.
- NIV: See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be **called children** of God!

And there are many other such examples when comparing older to newer translations.

It is our desire as a Deacon body to maintain cooperation with the SBC. However, we are at a loss as to why, after over 30 years of having Reverend Linda Barnes Popham serve as our pastor (nearly 40 years of total service here), the credentials committee waits until now to bring this issue up with our Church (and others such as Saddleback}...unless the motivation is to detract from other issues in the Convention which were tabled for future discussion.

Chapter One Creating Controversy

*The history of the world is but the biography of great men.
Philosopher Thomas Carlyle, 1795-1881*

There is no denying that women on the planet feel that they are living in a man's world-but is it a man's world?

*Whose
world is it?
Is it
man's?
Is it woman's?
Is it man and
woman's? Is it
God's?*

The world is God's by virtue of His creative activity, but to whom did He give governance over the Earth? The simple answer from Scripture is that man and woman were both given dominion. Dominion was a *both/and* thing, not an *either/or* thing. Dominion was a God-granted authority given to them together.

Genesis 1: 27 So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. 28 Then God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue

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it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth."

Why is there such upheaval and chaos between the sexes? The simple answer is sin. We'll save the longer version of the answer for a later chapter. For now, suffice it to say, things changed when sin occurred and God's original intentions for the relationship between men and women were not realized. The next question is- *Will they be realized?"* If so, *"How will it happen?"* and *"What will it look like?"*

We are now in a season where God is restoring women to His originally intended place for her. We should expect to see women gaining the respect of equality from more and

The war is not over women being given dominion over men-it is over women standing side by side with men.

more men. The war is not over women being given dominion over men-it is over women standing side by side with men. Both men and women have their respective God-given roles, but neither was

ever intended to exercise dominion over the other. Is there a place for a woman to speak directly into the life of a man? Did Eve's blunder forever seal men's ears to the voice of women? Has God called women into collective silence when it comes to sharing wisdom with men?

Some people think that because Paul wrote that a woman is not to teach a man, that God would *never* use a woman to give spiritual direction to a man. Yet, as Jesus stood before Pontius Pilate, word was sent to him by his wife about a dream she had.

Matt 27:19 While he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent to him, saying, "Have nothing to do with that just Man, for I have suffered many things today in a dream because of Him."

Where did her dream originate? Was it Satan trying to stop the crucifixion? That doesn't square with Scripture. Was she a psychic? Doesn't seem like the forces behind the occult would have taken a stand for Jesus, since He regularly sent demons packing, does it? She also declared Jesus a just man-innocent! It's interesting that she doesn't ask Pilate to consider what she is saying; she simply tells him straight out, *nHave nothing to do with that just man...*" Her statement was more of an order than a request. It sounds like she received revelation from God about the matter, doesn't it?

The truth is God chose to invade the dreams of Pilate's wife. She had a revelatory experience where she saw and experienced things about Jesus. She became aware that her husband was becoming a part of something sinister and unjust, so she warned him. He did not listen to her, but maybe this is what caused him to wash his hands and try to

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distance himself from the matter. The truth is God chose to speak to Pilate through his wife-a woman. He could have troubled Pilate's sleep, but He did not. He chose a woman. When the innocent Son of God stood before the reigning civil authority of His day, the voice God chose to speak for His innocent Son was the voice of a woman. As a matter of fact, it seems it was the only voice that came before Pilate in Jesus' defense. I believe the message that Pilate received from his wife was a message from God. The point-God has, does, and will speak to men through women. He worked through Deborah, Esther, Ruth, and many other anointed women in the Scriptures. Why would someone think it out of order for God to continue to speak through women today?

This book is written to help open the minds of men and women to this subject. Once minds begin to open to the truth, then everything else that needs to open will begin to open. I believe truth frees us from wrong mindsets. I am aware that there are passages in the New Testament that seem to suggest that women are not to have a part in the teaching or leadership ministry of the entire church. I encourage those desiring to study those passages in detail to read the excellent book, *Why Not Women: A Fresh Look at Scripture on Women in Missions, Ministry, and Leadership*.² Loren Cunningham and David Joel Hamilton do an excellent job of looking at the hermeneutics, context, and biblical language in order to rightly divide such passages in

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light of other very clear passages that demonstrate God's use of women in ministry.

On a practical level, think through the following questions with your own life and the lives of those closest to you in mind:

- How many of you men came to the Lord after your wife began faithfully serving Him?
- How many of you really got serious about Jesus after she did?
- How many of you were taught to pray by your mother or by a woman?
- How many of you had mothers that carried you to church?
- How many of you had a grandmother that loved the Lord?
- How many of you had a woman Sunday School teacher that really influenced you?
- Of the people that have most influenced your life spiritually, how many of them were women?

Most of us have been significantly influenced by women as our spirituality developed and afterwards as well. Thank God for godly mothers! It is interesting to realize that one of the major influences of a person's life during their formative years is their mother. In addition to many other areas, this is part of God's special and creative design for women. The role of women has influence inside and outside the home. Inside and outside the church. Inside and outside the

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marriage. She is not to be muted into silence. She is to use her gifts, talents, and her voice to the glory of God. Let everything that has breath, praise the Lord-including women!

I am aware that this book will create controversy. I am grateful for the wonderful experiences that I have enjoyed each place I have pastored, and I have very fond and grateful memories of my beloved seminary. They continue to do an awesome job of preparing ministers to enter the mission field and church field. However, I have experienced several areas of change concerning my beliefs since my seminary days. The bulk of what I received I still hold dearly. I have great respect and admiration for my professors, fellow students and pastors. I still consider myself very conservative theologically. I believe the Book! I

also believe that the Holy Spirit will guide us into all truth. Nevertheless, I have come to realize that we often wear lenses that distort what we see as we read the Bible. We need to pray, *uLord give us eyes to see and ears to understand.*" Jesus informed the religious leaders of His day that they were not really seeing what the Word said.

John 5:39 You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me. 40 But you are not willing to come to Me that you may have life. 41 I do not receive honor from men:

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We must not interpret the Bible by the buddy system. Too often, we simply parrot what we have been taught instead of studying the Scripture for ourselves. Thank God for good teachers, good books, and seasoned theologians. However, we must not allow the fear of the disapproval of

The new and unfamiliar is often feared by all of us who have chosen to live in the comfort zone.

man to keep us from embracing truth. Truth transforms us as we obey it. Martin Luther was branded a heretic by his "buddies." The Wesley brothers drew the ire of their compatriots. Finney was criticized by pastors for his unorthodox beliefs and practices. I am not placing myself alongside these giants of the faith; I just saying forerunners have to wade through the briars and thickets clearing a path that makes it easier for those who follow. The new and unfamiliar is often feared by all of us who have chosen to live in the comfort zone. The Lord has a way of confronting us with the truth we say we believe in order for it be become settled in our hearts. In this season, He is raising up people who will trumpet the truth concerning the restoration of the voice of women. The following story illustrates how this can happen.

Recently, as I was completing this book, my family and I attended the mid-year graduation ceremony at the University of North Alabama to celebrate with our nephew who was receiving his undergraduate degree. The place

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was packed, and we ended up sitting in the nose bleed section. As I scanned through the program, I noticed the special speaker who had been invited to deliver the commencement address was the Senior Pastor of Fern Creek Baptist Church in Louisville, Kentucky. The thing that stood out was that this Senior Pastor was a woman-- Rev. Linda Barnes Popham. Linda grew up in our area and had graduated from the University of North Alabama. I immediately started running material through the ole thought mill in my head:

This was a bold step on the part of the school's president.

What will this crowd think about a woman pastor as the commencement speaker?

Will they heckle her?

Will they applaud her?

We are in the center of the Bible Belt, who would have figured this?

Is she an extreme theological liberal?

I then began to process what was going on in my own heart and mind:

How strange this has happened in our city while I am writing a book about the restoration of a woman's voice.

Why do I feel uncomfortable seeing this in the program?

Why am I assuming she may be extremely liberal?

I think I remember her name from somewhere.

Creating Controversy

She was the center of controversy in the SBC just after I graduated seminary.

I remember now! I remember how I felt back in the early nineties when her church was voting on her to become their Senior Pastor.

In that moment there was a collision of who I had been and who I had become. I had to deal with the resurgence of feelings that reminded me of my critical tongue and the judgment that had ruled in my heart.

I sat through the first part of the service wondering what would happen once Rev. Popham took the podium. The time came for President William Cale to introduce her. As she stepped to the podium, there was a gracious but meager applause. I thought, *This is going to be interesting.* She began speaking. I quickly accessed, *She is confident, articulate, and very personable.* Would I have made the same observations about - a man? My own newly formed convictions were being challenged and I was grateful. It is important that we come to the place where convictions become settled because they have been tested. People could sense the tension in the room. The crowd knew the vast majority of Alabama Bible Belt believers in the auditorium were being put to the test. Even those who were not believers were aware of the cultural stretching occurring in the room. No one knew it more than Linda Barnes Popham. I am sure questions were whirling in people's mind.

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She was within the borders of her own hometown, what would her countryman do?

What would she do?

Would she address the issue?

Would she graciously ignore it?

Would she tackle it head on?

How would she approach our mindsets if she did take it on?

As she proceeded, she did take it on, head on. She shared the struggles of the trials and mistreatment her path had led her through. She encouraged the graduating students not to be deterred by the obstacles that would try to block their paths. At one point, you could hear mumbling among the people beginning to arise, but it quickly subsided. She shared that she was one of around 40 women who served as Senior Pastors out of more than 40,000 churches in the Southern Baptist Convention. She informed us that there were two women Senior Pastors in Baptist churches in the state of Alabama-the same as Kentucky, the state in which she pastored. She shared some of the conversations she had experienced among her peers like the time she called one of the denominational offices and was told she did not exist. Interestingly, she stated that the greatest obstacle she had to face was other women-not men. The statement surprised me. She also gave a bold and courageous challenge to the whole building to stop holding back the voices that wanted to spread the Good News.

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She's a feisty fighter, I found myself thinking. The best was yet to come. She then gave a very bold witness for Jesus Christ. Unashamedly and uncompromisingly, she shared that He was the passion of her life and that her main desire was to see people come to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. I thought, *Wow! She is bold and courageous!* In the middle of a secular institution on their big night, she preached Christ. Would a man have done so? Would most men have used the opportunity to glorify Christ or would we have thrown a few hints hoping people would fill in the blanks? She left no blanks to fill in. Regardless of what people thought about her right *to* be a Senior Pastor, they could not deny she had a passion for people to know Jesus Christ. I do not know Linda Barnes Popham. I do not know all that she believes, and I know little of her personal history. This is not my disclaimer, just the truth. However; I do believe she loves Jesus and He was pleased with the way she shared Him with an audience that was doubtless filled with people who needed *to* know of His great love. When she finished, there was a wonderful applause from the people. I was proud of her and I was proud of the way an Alabama Bible Belt audience graciously honored her.

I am raising questions that will cause us to seek answers. I am challenging all of us *to* rethink what we think about the voices of women in the body of Christ. The term "woman preacher" is a hot button in many camps and fighting words for more than a few.

- Should a woman preach the gospel where men are present?
- Can a woman biblically teach men?
- Are women to remain silent in public worship?
- Is she limited to just sharing a testimony or teaching women and children?

What does the Word of God teach us that Jesus thought about the subject? *Find out what Jesus said and stick with it!* This is good advice for any of us. I remember as a Baptist pastor on several occasions when a woman spoke in our services that I was always careful to say that "Sister _____ is going to share a testimony with us tonight." This was the safety net. Usually, she would preach, and we would talk about the wonderful way she shared her testimony or gave her report. These word games are still played.

Luther's battle in what we now call the Protestant Reformation yielded the cry of *Sola Scriptura*: He started a revolution insisting that the Bible alone should serve as the basis of authority in the Church. At the core of what Luther and his followers heralded was the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. In other words, all believers had access to God directly. There was no need to go through any other human mediator because Christ was the mediator of the New Testament and every believer was represented by

Him. The reformation birthed many changes. The new movement began putting the Scriptures in the hands of the common man and woman. Men who were priests began to marry. Women who were nuns began to marry. Prayers were offered in the language of the people instead of Latin. Believing that all believers had direct access to God without any human mediation became a cultural bulldozer clearing

The Barna Research Group indicates "that women shoulder most of the responsibility for the health and vitality of the Christian faith in the country."

a new path by which people worshipped God. Yet today many people who feel it is alright for a woman to talk directly with God still wince at the notion that she can talk directly to mere men. She

can share her heart with God, but in many places she cannot share her heart with an audience where men are present. God's door is open; but, for the most part, man's door remains closed.

What is the value of women in the life of the church today? The Barna Research Group indicates "that women shoulder most of the responsibility for the health and vitality of the Christian faith in the country."³ Barna also states that among born again believers in America that there are 11 to 13 million more women than men. However in leadership in the churches, over 90% of Senior Pastors are men.⁴ I do not believe that the core of the war is about getting women

Woman- Who God Says She Is!

into positions of Senior Pastor; it is about men valuing the voice of women-period! Side by side they are to stand receiving from one another in the fullness of Christ. Until men are ready to hear what women say, the words of women will not be readily received or redemptively heard.

■

My wife and I talked about the aforementioned graduation experience on the way home that night as well as the next morning. We both agreed that the timing of the writing of this book and the graduation experience was uncanny and that God was saying something to us through it. We realized that this book would be controversial. More than likely, it would bring both trouble and blessing to us. The conclusion was, **"Will of God, be done!"**

Appendix C: Email Request from Credentials Committee (Credentials Committee 2022)

From: credentials <credentials@sbcc.net>
Sent: Monday, October 17, 2022 10:57 AM
To: [REDACTED]
Cc: [REDACTED]
Subject: The relationship of Fern Creek Baptist Church with the Southern Baptist Convention



SOUTHERN BAPTIST CONVENTION
CREDENTIALS COMMITTEE

October 17, 2022

Dear Fern Creek Baptist Church,

We write to notify you that our committee has received a request to consider the relationship between Fern Creek Baptist Church, Louisville, Kentucky, and the Southern Baptist Convention. Specifically, the request is to consider whether the church "has a faith and practice which closely identifies with the Convention's adopted statement of faith," namely the *Baptist Faith & Message 2000*.

We recognize that neither the Southern Baptist Convention nor our committee has any authority over Fern Creek Baptist Church or any other Baptist body. This is clearly stated in Article IV of the SBC Constitution. However, the Convention does determine for itself the churches with which it will cooperate and has tasked our committee to assist in resolving the question of whether a church should be considered to be in cooperation with the Convention. We need your help in resolving the questions that have been raised.

We know that receiving a letter like this may be difficult, but in light of the information our committee received, we must ask that your church answer a few questions so that we have the information we need. In addition, if there is any information the church would like for us to consider, we would be happy to receive it. We kindly request the church's response to the following questions.

1. Has the church historically retained a man, as qualified by scripture, as its pastor, bishop, elder or overseer? Please explain.
2. Does the church currently retain, as its pastor, bishop, elder or overseer, a man as qualified by Scripture? If no, please explain the church's decision.
3. The Convention's adopted statement of faith, the *Baptist Faith & Message 2000*, Article VI. The Church, reads as follows:
...
While both men and women are gifted for service in the church, the office of pastor is limited to men as qualified by Scripture.
...
Please help our committee understand how your church's beliefs closely identify with the Convention's beliefs specifically regarding the *Baptist Faith & Message*, Article VI. The Church.
4. On occasion, a church makes the decision to no longer identify with the Southern Baptist Convention as a "Cooperating church" and chooses to discontinue its relationship, unbeknownst to us. Does Fern Creek Baptist Church desire be in cooperation with the Southern Baptist Convention?
5. Would a representative of the church like to request a meeting to discuss this matter?
6. Has the church been contacted by the local Baptist association or state convention regarding this matter? If yes, please explain.

We are grateful for the partnership with Fern Creek Baptist Church in supporting the missions and ministries of the Convention and we appreciate your assistance in resolving the questions raised. We look forward to hearing back from you at your earliest convenience and ask that you please respond within **thirty (30) days** of receipt. Declining to respond may be viewed as an indication that the church does not wish to be considered a cooperating church with the Convention. This is not our desire. Your response may be emailed to credentials@sbcc.net or sent by mail to SBC Credentials Committee, 901 Commerce Street, Nashville, TN 37203.

Sincerely,
SBC Credentials Committee

CC: Louisville Regional Association
Kentucky Baptist Convention

Appendix D: Timeline

- January 5, 2018 – Jules Woodson posts her story of sexual abuse by Andy Savage online
- May 3, 2018 – Paige Patterson, president of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary is fired for mishandling rape cases
- June 2018 – motion to request newly-elected SBC president to create a Sexual Abuse task force
- July 26th, 2018 – SBC president J.D. Greear launches Sexual Abuse Advisory Group
- Aug 2018 – Catholic church clerical sex abuse grand jury report
- Feb. 10th, 2019 – Abuse of Faith series begins in Houston Chronicle
- June 11th-12th 2019 – Sexual abuse and discrimination clauses added to Constitution
- May 6th, 2021 – Saddleback Church ordains Liz Puffer, Cynthia Petty, and Katie Edwards
- Feb 23, 2021 – Four churches disfellowshipped for sexual abuse or homosexuality, including St. Matthews Baptist Church
- June 15th-16th 2021 – SBC Annual Meeting in Nashville, TN
- June 15th 2021 – Shad Tibbs makes motion to disfellowship Saddleback
- June 15th 2021 – Sexual Abuse Task Force created
- June 14th-15th 2022 – Warren delivers address at Anaheim Convention
- June 14th 2022 - Sexual Abuse Task Force Report
- June 14th 2022 – Mike Law proposes amendment to allow churches to cooperate with the SBC only if they do not “affirm, appoint, or employ a woman as a pastor of any kind.”
- Oct. 17th 2022 – Reverend Popham receives Credentials Committee inquiry email
- January 9th 2023 – Reverend Popham and several deacons meet on Zoom with credentials committee
- February 3rd 2023 – Credentials Committee informs Fern Creek that they will recommend the church for disfellowship
- February 21st 2023 – Executive Committee meets and expels Fern Creek and five other churches
- June 13th 2023 - Reverend Popham makes appeal before the SBC
- June 13th 2023 – Law Amendment gains first of two necessary two-thirds approval votes by SBC messengers
- June 11th 2024 – First Baptist Church of Alexandria, Virginia is disfellowshipped for stating that they would hire a female pastor
- June 11th 2024 – Law Amendment fails second of two necessary two-thirds approval votes by SBC messengers

Appendix E: Fern Creek Baptist Letter of Intent (Credentials Committee 2023)



SOUTHERN BAPTIST CONVENTION *CREDENTIALS COMMITTEE*

February 3, 2023

Fern Creek Baptist Church
5920 Bardstown Road
Louisville, KY 40291

Dear Fern Creek Baptist Church,

The Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) Constitution Article IV declares: While independent and sovereign in its own sphere, the Convention does not claim and will never attempt to exercise any authority over any other Baptist body, whether church, auxiliary organizations, associations, or convention. In exercising the Convention's sovereignty over its own affairs, SBC Constitution Article III provides that the Convention will only deem a church to be in friendly cooperation with the Convention and sympathetic with its purposes and work which "has a faith and practice which closely identifies with the Convention's adopted statement of faith."

This letter is to notify you that on February 21, 2023, the Credentials Committee, acting pursuant to SBC Bylaw 8, Section C (3) intends to report to the Executive Committee that it has formed the opinion that Fern Creek Baptist Church should no longer be considered a cooperating church with the Convention. The decision of this committee is one that was made with a heavy heart. It was considered with much prayer and not taken lightly, as we grieve whenever a church no longer closely identifies with the Southern Baptist Convention.

The decision of the Executive Committee on February 21, 2023 is final. Should your church make the decision to voluntarily withdraw from cooperation with the Convention, in order to avoid our committee's recommendation or any action by the Executive Committee, please notify us no later than Sunday, February 19, 2023 by email to credentials@sbcc.net at which time our committee shall withdraw its report to the Executive Committee for consideration and no action will be taken.

Should the Executive Committee approve the recommendation of the Credentials Committee and deem your church to no longer be in cooperation with the Convention, the church may appeal their decision under SBC Bylaw 8, Section C(3) by submitting a written appeal to the chair of the Credentials Committee at least **30 days prior** to the 2023 Annual Meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention, which is May 14, 2023. Such appeal should be sent to credentials@sbcc.net or by mail to SBC Credentials Committee, 901 Commerce Street, Nashville, TN 37203.

Further, SBC Bylaw 8, Section C(4) provides that if a church, which has been found not to be in cooperation with the Convention, addresses the issues which led to that finding, it may apply to the Credentials Committee for a reconsideration of its status. If the circumstances warrant, the Credentials Committee may recommend to the Executive Committee that the church be once again considered a cooperating church of the Southern Baptist Convention.

It is our hope and prayer that Fern Creek Baptist Church will address the matter which is the cause for our intended recommendation to the Executive Committee during its February 20-21, 2023, meeting.

Sincerely,
SBC Credentials Committee