

African American Fellowship expresses concerns over messengers' actions

NASHVILLE (BP and local reports) – The National African American Fellowship (NAAF) of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) is urging Southern Baptists “to consider entering a time of prayer and dialogue” about recent decisions related to women serving as pastors.

The July 3 letter, written by NAAF President Gregory Perkins, lead pastor of The View Church in Menifee, Calif., and addressed to SBC President Bart Barber, pastor of First Church, Farmersville, Texas, lists concerns about the actions of messengers at the SBC's 2023 Annual Meeting last month in New Orleans.

“These actions, while within the rights of our messengers, undermine the tie that binds i.e., the autonomy of the local church and are inconsistent with our shared Baptist polity,” wrote Perkins.

“This may signal to churches in the SBC that do not believe that women should be the Senior Pastor but allow women the usage of a pastoral title, or appoints a woman to a pastoral role, are no longer welcome in the SBC,” the letter states.

According to the letter, NAAF represents about 4,000 Southern Baptist churches. “Many of our churches assign the title ‘pastor’ to women who oversee ministries of the church under the authority of a male Senior Pastor, i.e., Children's Pastor, Worship Pastor, Discipleship Pastor, etc.,” Perkins wrote.

“To disfellowship like-minded churches who share our faith in Jesus Christ, our belief in the authority of Scripture, our

mandate to carry out the Great Commission, and our agreement to give cooperatively based upon a local-church governance decision dishonors the spirit of cooperation and the guiding tenets of our denomination,” the letter stated.

Messengers to the 2023 Annual Meeting in New Orleans:

- Voted to uphold an SBC Executive Committee recommendation to remove from cooperation Saddleback Church in Lake Forest, Calif. and Fern Creek Church in Louisville, Ky., based on women serving under the titles of preaching pastors or senior pastors.

The two churches had appealed the Executive Committee’s recommendations. Calvary Church, Jackson, was also dismissed by the Executive Committee for calling a woman as senior pastor, but did not appeal.

- Passed a first vote to amend the SBC Constitution to state that only “churches that affirm, appoint, or employ only men as any kind of pastor or elder as qualified by Scripture” will be viewed to be in friendly cooperation with the SBC

A Q&A document was also posted to NAAF’s website. It speaks to concerns about the constitutional amendment and calls for further dialogue. There were three primary concerns listed by the group:

- The appropriateness of bringing changes to the SBC Constitution to the floor for a vote without referring it first to a committee or task force for study.

- The appropriateness of the Chair to dismiss the call for a ballot vote.

- The lack of sufficient information and sufficient time to deliberate on such thorny issues with such significant ramifications across all levels of the SBC.

In a statement to Baptist Press, Barber praised the call to

prayer and dialogue. "What a Christ-honoring, biblical way to approach decisions when fellow believers want to find common ground and make decisions together!

"I honor and value these partners in the work of the gospel. I will make sure that the entire SBC family has ample opportunity for prayer and dialogue throughout the coming year leading up to our meeting next June in Indianapolis," Barber wrote.

Barber said he plans to attend the Black Church Leadership and Family Conference sponsored by NAAF next week at Ridgecrest, N.C., and believes the dialogue will begin there.

Willie McLaurin, interim president and CEO of the SBC Executive Committee in Nashville and himself an African American, confirmed he received a copy of the letter and said the SBC Executive Committee "stands ready to engage in ongoing dialogue."

"NAAF's call to prayer and dialogue speaks to the cooperative spirit of our Convention. The strength of our Convention is local churches. Local churches baptize, plant churches, and send missionaries around the corner and around the globe," McLaurin said.

The letter penned by Perkins was also sent to:

- Jerome Coleman, vice president of NAAF and senior pastor of First Church Crestmont in Willow Grove, Pa.
- Charles Grant, associate vice president for Black church relations at the SBC Executive Committee.
- Dennis Mitchell, NAAF executive director.
- The NAAF Executive Board.

Editor's note: Gregory Perkins is not related to William Perkins, editor of The Baptist Record.