

First Church, Tupelo, experiences the SBC firsthand

By Tony Martin

Editor

The 2024 Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) Annual Meeting and Pastors' Conference took place June 9–12 at the Indiana Convention Center in Indianapolis, Indiana. The conference included almost 200 ancillary meetings, events, and gatherings, with 10,946 messengers registered.

In addition to messengers, 3,132 guests and 2,740 exhibitors registered for the 2024 meeting, bringing total attendance to 16,818. Messengers hailed from all 50 states, D.C., and Puerto Rico, representing 3,988 churches. First Church, Tupelo, was part of that number.

According to Pastor Matt Powell, prior to 2024, the church typically only sent a couple of messengers, although based on their Cooperative Program giving and size, they were allowed 12. "Typically, it's my wife and me. Historically, if someone went, it was the pastor."

First Church ended up taking 12 messengers, along with spouses and families, for a group of 25.

"Last year, I was taken off-guard by how the 'Law Amendment' was put forward," Powell said.

The "Law Amendment" voted on at the 2024 Southern Baptist Convention aimed to amend the SBC Constitution to explicitly state that only men could serve as pastors or elders in churches that are in "friendly cooperation" with the SBC. This proposal was initiated by Mike Law, a pastor from Virginia, in response to debates over the roles of women in pastoral positions within the denomination.

The proposed amendment sought to add a sixth qualification to Article III of the SBC Constitution, reinforcing that a church must not affirm, appoint, or employ women as pastors or elders. This came after the SBC Credentials Committee faced challenges in making decisions regarding churches with female pastors, particularly highlighted by the situation with Saddleback Church in California, which had ordained three women pastors in 2021.

Despite passing with an overwhelming majority in its first vote at the 2023 SBC annual meeting, the amendment needed a two-thirds majority in two consecutive votes to be enacted. In 2024, the amendment received a majority but fell short of the required two-thirds majority, with 61.45% voting in favor and 38.55% against.

The debate around the Law Amendment has stirred significant discussion within the SBC about biblical qualifications for pastoral roles and the implications for church cooperation. Although the amendment did not pass, the SBC continues to hold to its 2000 Baptist Faith & Message, which limits the office of pastor to men as qualified by Scripture.

Powell shared his feelings about the Law Amendment with the church. The church offered to help subsidize a trip to the Convention for any interested parties. About 40 people initially wanted to go.

“We’ve never had any kind of organized effort to take people to the convention,” Powell said. “Outside of my children, the youngest person we took was 14, and the eldest person we took was 88. And it was everybody in between and they loved it.”

The church chartered a bus for the trip to Indianapolis. Part of their agenda included visiting Southern Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. “People showed gratitude because they had no idea they were part of this,” Powell said. “And another very powerful moment was the commissioning of the IMB

missionaries. So on the way back, people are asking questions, like, 'How much money are we giving to the Cooperative Program?' so we got to have that conversation. People got to see firsthand what the Cooperative Program actually does, and it was just so powerful for them.

"We roll our eyes sometimes when we think, oh, another business meeting," Powell continued. "But all our members were, like, 'I was impressed by how orderly everything was.' Even when you had people who sharply disagreed, everything was orderly. We sat through the entire thing. We didn't miss a thing."

Some from First Tupelo's group read the news analyses from secular sources. "They were able to say, well, that's a misrepresentation. One of our members, an attorney, mentioned to me, 'Matt, I've read every year on Fox or CNN or some newspaper somewhere about what happened. I was there. It really is something.' There was a gratitude for being part of the SBC."

Powell stated that the church doesn't have a Sunday night service anymore. "It was very poorly attended when I got here in 2016," he said. "I proposed that on Sunday nights instead of a service we did a training time in the Fellowship Hall and just did it in the semesters, so we were out for December and out for the summer, and we'd always take off for spring break and fall break. We were saying, hey, we're asking for 16 to 20 weeks a year, depending on the calendar. That has just been the best idea, offering classes. We've never done anything like that before. Of course, you and I both know it was just called Church Training.

"Each semester, classes are offered, and one of those eight-week classes is going to be the Southern Baptist Convention, the Mississippi Baptist Convention, and the Cooperative Program. We're going to make that a requirement in order to complete the program on Sunday night. Everybody has to go

through that one time," Powell said. "In 2016, we'd have about 50 on Sunday nights. Now on Sunday nights during the semesters, I don't know what the average would be, but early in the semester we have over 500."