

Pastor Steven Furtick's Elevation Megachurch Severs Ties with SBC

In a recent blow to the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), Elevation Church, one of its prominent congregations, has made the decision to withdraw its affiliation with the denomination. This development comes less than a month after the permanent expulsion of Saddleback Church for having women pastors.

Elevation Church, known for its multiple campuses and influential role in contemporary Christian worship music, formally notified the SBC of its withdrawal on June 26.

The church's correspondence did not explicitly state the reason behind the decision. Notably, Elevation Pastor Steven Furtick's wife, Holly Furtick, delivers sermons to both men and women at the church and shares links to her messages on her website.

Letter from @ElevationChurch withdrawing from SBC references Credentials Committee. Has a complaint been filed on them?

"Should your Credentials Committee decide to make this decision by Elevation public, we will only respond with a copy of this letter in anyone inquiring..."

– SBC Platform (@TheSBCPlatform) June 30, 2023

According to the denomination's statement of faith, the Baptist Faith and Message, the position of a pastor is reserved for qualified men. Prominent leaders within the Southern Baptist community have emphasized the inseparable connection between preaching and the role of a pastor.

During the SBC's annual meeting earlier in June, representatives overwhelmingly affirmed the expulsion of Saddleback Church, founded by Rick Warren, and Fern Creek Baptist Church in Louisville, Kentucky. These churches, along with three others, had appealed their removal by the SBC's Executive Committee due to their inclusion of women pastors.

The Executive Committee received the Elevation Church's withdrawal notice, which was made public by the SBC's official news service, Baptist Press. The church asserted that its beliefs are closely aligned with those of Southern Baptists and that there are no plans to alter this stance. Elevation Church's decision to sever ties with the convention is effective immediately.

In addition to the withdrawal, SBC representatives conducted a preliminary vote during the annual meeting to amend the SBC constitution. The proposed amendment would require participating churches to have exclusively qualified men serving as pastors or elders.

Established in 2006, Elevation Church, headquartered in Matthews, North Carolina, boasts multiple campuses throughout the Charlotte area, as well as in neighboring states and Canada. According to the Outreach 100 survey conducted by Outreach magazine, the church averaged 26,000 weekly worshippers in 2022, ranking as the seventh-largest Protestant church in terms of attendance.

Internal records of the SBC indicate that in 2021, the church had an average attendance of 10,185. Discrepancies between the church's attendance figures and those of the denomination may be attributed to variations in counting online worshippers in the post-pandemic era.

Elevation Church has also gained recognition for its extensive repertoire of worship music, which has significantly influenced the contemporary Christian music landscape. The

church's affiliated music ministry, Elevation Worship, has been honored with six Dove Awards, including the coveted "Song of the Year" for their uplifting anthem, "The Blessing," which went viral during the 2020 pandemic lockdown.

Scott Thumma, a seasoned researcher focusing on megachurches, suggests that Elevation Church's decision aligns with the SBC's firm stance against Rick Warren's appeal. Warren had expressed the belief that Baptists should be able to hold differing opinions on matters such as women in ministry while still collaborating on missions and evangelism.

Thumma speculates that Elevation's departure might serve as a catalyst for other churches to follow suit, rather than waiting for the SBC to initiate their removal.

The Southern Baptist Convention has experienced a steady decline in membership over the past two decades, although it remains the largest Protestant denomination in the United States. Lifeway Research statistics released earlier this year reveal a membership decrease to 13.2 million in 2022, the lowest level since the late 1970s, with long-term declines in baptism rates as well. {eo}

James Lasher is Staff Writer for Charisma Media.