

SBC Elects Racial Reconciliation Pastor as New President

Ed Litton, the relatively unknown senior pastor of Redemption Church in Saraland, Alabama, defeated two preeminent rivals to be elected president of the Southern Baptist Convention during a session of the SBC's annual meeting Tuesday (June 15).

Litton has made racial reconciliation a hallmark of his work since at least the 2014 riots after the killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. Litton's election is considered a defeat for hard-right conservatives in the Southern Baptist Convention's recent battles over race, sexual abuse and gender roles.

Litton won in the second round of voting Tuesday, defeating conservative Georgia pastor Mike Stone, a former SBC Executive Committee chair and favorite of the Conservative Baptist Network, which has been critical of SBC leadership, saying it has become captive to liberal ideas.

In the first round, Stone and Litton each received about a third of the 13,181 votes cast, with Southern Baptist Theological Seminary President Albert Mohler Jr. drawing about a quarter of the vote. Randy Adams, an executive of the Northwest Baptist Convention, was a distant fourth.

The close vote, however, with Litton only winning a majority by 2%, highlighted the deep divide within the denomination and gave some conservatives hope. Stone supporter Rod D. Martin noted in a tweet after the results were announced: "We didn't win. But this result shows we can."

Litton, who served as the SBC's first vice president in 2001, becomes the 63rd president of the SBC and will take over from

J.D. Greear, pastor of The Summit Church in Durham, North Carolina, who served an extra year due to the cancellation of the 2020 annual meeting amid the coronavirus pandemic.

Dean Inserra, pastor of a large SBC church in Tallahassee, Florida, described Litton as “one of the most godly men I know,” in a congratulatory tweet. “We are in VERY good hands.”

Fred Luter, the only Black pastor to serve as president of the SBC, from 2012 to 2014, announced in January that he would nominate Litton on Tuesday. The two have been friends for more than 20 years and met when they swapped pulpits for a “Racial Reconciliation Sunday” event.

“From there, our relationship developed to more than just colleagues to bring races together,” Luter told Baptist Press, the SBC’s official news organization.

Luter and Litton were among the signers of “Justice, Repentance and the SBC,” a December 2020 statement published after heads of six Southern Baptist seminaries issued a statement rejecting critical race theory.

Since the Ferguson riots, Litton has worked on local race issues in Mobile, Alabama, with other pastors and town leaders known as “The Pledge Group.” He has been critical of the SBC’s lack of progress on racial issues and told the SBC’s 2019 Pastor’s Conference in Birmingham: “Our resolutions on race led nobody to weep over four girls who were bombed and killed at 16th Street Baptist Church blocks away from here. It has led nobody to weep over the 3,446 African Americans lynched since 1886.”

Ahead of the election on Tuesday, Luter, pastor of Franklin Avenue Baptist Church in New Orleans, called Litton someone who could unite Southern Baptists and get them focused on evangelism, not fighting among themselves. “Take it from Fred, vote for Ed,” Luter told the crowd of more than 15,000 eligible voters.

The 2021 SBC presidential election comes at a time of tension for the nation's largest Protestant denomination. The denomination has declined by close to 2 million members since 2006 and its rate of baptisms has been stagnant for years. Southern Baptists have also been divided over issues of race and immigration, support for former President Donald Trump, gender roles and allegations of mishandling sexual abuse cases.

Dwight McKissic, the popular Black pastor of Cornerstone Baptist Church in Arlington, Texas, recently told *The New Yorker* magazine that he would leave the denomination if Stone or Mohler won.

Litton said in a news conference after his election that he would continue some of the work on diversity done by Greear and would tell Baptists of color that they are needed in the convention. He also addressed the question of critical race theory, saying Southern Baptists don't need to fear that it will be taught in their seminaries.

After graduating from Grand Canyon University in 1983, and Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Litton served in church and state convention posts in Texas and Arizona before helping to found Mountain View Baptist Church in Tucson. He became pastor at Redemption—then known as First Baptist North Mobile—in 1994. In 2007, his wife of 25 years and mother of their two children, Tammy, was killed in a car accident.

In 2009 he married Kathy Ferguson, who had lost her husband, also a pastor, in an auto accident seven years earlier.

Soft-spoken, with a calm demeanor, Litton talked of the power of humility and of listening to one another. He described himself as complementarian in theology but said he was proud to have had Kathy Litton help him teach a sermon series on marriage—a point of contention for some critics, who believe the Bible forbids women from preaching in church.

At the news conference, Litton shared a bit about his upbringing. His father, who had a problem with alcohol, came to faith through the ministry of a Southern Baptist pastor, changing his life. "We had a front-row seat for a miracle," he said.

Litton went on to describe the SBC as a family. Like any family, he said, Southern Baptists sometimes disagree and sometimes fight loud enough for the neighbors to hear.

Still, he said, Southern Baptist love God and one another and are committed to the Great Commission.

As an underdog in the race for president, Litton said he had peace about the election, no matter how it turned out. "In some ways I was ready to go home," he said. "I told my church, if next Wednesday morning I wake up and I am just your pastor, I am so good with that. Highest honor of my life is to pastor a local church."

James T. Draper Jr., who supervised Litton in the 1980s, told *Baptist Press* in 2008 that he fully recognized the younger man's spiritual leadership the day of Litton's first wife's funeral.

"After the graveside service at the cemetery, people just kind of stood around in groups," Draper recalled. "Ed started moving from group to group, speaking to everybody, then finally spoke to the whole group. Here he was, at the most critical moment in his life, and yet he was comforting other people. In the midst of his grief, he was still the pastor.

"I thought, 'You know, being a pastor is not something he does; it's something he is,'" Draper said. {eo}

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