

Expelled megachurch's founding pastor says Southern Baptists are 'in crisis'

BY MARK A. KELLNER THE WASHINGTON TIMES, JUNE 2, 2023



The Rev. Rick Warren, founding pastor of one of the Southern Baptist Convention's largest congregations — until its expulsion for installing a woman as a teaching pastor — says the nation's largest Protestant denomination is "at the crossroads [of] denial or revival."

"Over the course of 17 years, the denomination has lost 3 million members. This isn't a glitch or the result of a pandemic: It's a trajectory we've been on for a while," Mr. Warren, founder of Saddleback Church, said in a 39-minute video that was posted Tuesday. "Some SBC leaders seem unable to admit it or talk about it, but denial is dishonesty. We should be worrying about it." He blamed a departure from distinctive Baptist teachings for the crisis.

"Every year, Southern Baptists have become less Baptist. We're becoming more Presbyterian in structure and more fundamentalist in our actions and attitudes," Mr. Warren said, adding that local churches "are losing their independence and autonomy," falling prey to a centralization of power.

"We are increasingly controlled by our institutions and bureaucracies, who have been systematically increasing their power to enforce uniformity as the difference between uniformity and unity. This is a very un-Baptist idea," said Mr. Warren, author of the best-selling book "The Purpose Driven Life."

The megachurch founder's critique of the SBC comes as Saddleback prepares to appeal its expulsion from the denomination at the June 12-13 annual business meeting. The SBC expelled the Southern California church in February over its employment of a woman as a "teaching pastor."

According to the denomination's "Faith & Message" statement, which summarizes SBC beliefs, "while both men and women are gifted for service in the church, the office of pastor is limited to men as qualified by Scripture."

In his video, Mr. Warren said a future posting will discuss "all the New Testament passages that support the Great Commission ministry of women," referring to Jesus' injunction in Matthew 28:19-20 for the church to "go and make disciples."

He said he rejects “complementarianism,” a theological position that rejects women from ordained ministry, and “egalitarianism,” which in evangelical Christian circles includes support for women exercising spiritual leadership as clergy.

“I don’t expect to change many minds ... but I just want to show you that there are biblical alternatives” to those positions, he said, noting it was something “it took me years of Bible study” to discover.

“It was a difficult journey to have my biases and cultural traditions blown away by the word of God. But when I was confronted with the truth, I had to humbly repent, no matter what my friends would think of me,” he said.

One SBC pastor has taken Mr. Warren to task on Twitter, viewed more than 351,000 times.

“Southern Baptists need to pray for Rick Warren. He is exalting himself above God’s Word, standing against Scripture, and is urging others to follow him into the black night of faithlessness,” the Rev. Heath Lambert, senior pastor at the First Baptist Church of Jacksonville, Florida, tweeted.