

# The New York Times

## ***‘Take the Ship’: Conservatives Aim to Commandeer Southern Baptists***

*The insurgents, some adopting a pirate motif, believe that the denomination has drifted too far to the left on issues of race, gender and the strict authority of the Bible.*



*Allen Nelson IV in his office at Perryville Second Baptist Church in Perryville, Ark., where he serves as pastor. Mr. Nelson is among those who think the Southern Baptist Convention has drifted too far to the left.*

**By Ruth Graham and Elizabeth Dias**

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Allen Nelson IV walked to the front of his small church in central Arkansas, stopped in front of the communion table with three large crosses behind him, and unfurled a giant black flag with a white skull and crossed swords.

For several years, the pastor and father of five had felt that too many of his fellow Christians were drifting unmistakably leftward on issues of race, gender and the strict authority of the Bible. The flag was a gift from a friend, energized — like Mr. Nelson — by the idea of heroically reclaiming the faith.

It was time, he believed, to “take the ship.”

“We’re fighting for the very heart of the Southern Baptist Convention,” Mr. Nelson said in an interview. “For a long time what I thought a good Southern Baptist pastor should do was to send money and trust the system. We can’t do that anymore.”

Mr. Nelson is not alone. He is part of an ultraconservative populist uprising of pastors from Louisiana to California threatening to overtake the country's largest Protestant denomination.

Next week more than 16,000 Southern Baptist pastors and leaders will descend on Nashville for their first annual meeting of the post-Trump era. It is their most high-profile gathering in years, with attendance more than double the most recent meeting in 2019, after a pandemic cancellation last year. It caps months of vicious infighting over every cultural and political division facing the country, particularly after the murder of George Floyd.

The outcome has the potential to permanently split an already divided evangelical America. Like the Trump movement within the Republican Party, a populist groundswell within the already conservative evangelical denomination is trying to install an anti-establishment leader who could wrench the church even further to the right, while opponents contend that the church must broaden its reach to preserve its strength. For three days, thousands of delegates known as "messengers" — most of them white men — will fight over race, sex and ultimately the future of evangelical power in the United States.

The large increase in attendance this year is "not an influx of the woke," said Tom Buck, a pastor in Texas and a leader of the upstart conservative wing, who has been fundraising for like-minded pastors to get to Nashville to vote. "It's an influx of the awakened to what the woke have been advancing."

An event that has historically been compared to a family reunion may look more like a brawl. In the past several weeks, Baptists have pored over leaked bombshell letters and whistle-blower recordings, and traded accusations of racism, apostasy and sexual abuse cover-ups. Leaders have taken barbed potshots at each other. Others have headed for the door.

Russell Moore, the denomination's influential head of ethics and public policy, left on June 1. The popular author and speaker Beth Moore, who is not related to Mr. Moore, announced in March that she is no longer a Southern Baptist, citing the "staggering" disorientation of seeing the denomination's leaders support Donald J. Trump, and lamenting its treatment of women. Some conservatives triumphantly celebrated both departures.

Messengers will confront a series of measures likely including the propriety of women delivering sermons, the handling of sexual abuse and a denunciation of critical race theory, the concept that historical patterns of racism remain ingrained in modern American society and institutions.

Those hoping to "take the ship" maintain that piracy is nothing more than a cheeky metaphor for a dry, democratic process. Still, the swashbuckling imagery has taken hold. There are "Take the Ship" T-shirts and pirate car flags, GIFs and memes; many supporters attach a pirate flag emoji to their Twitter handles.

In Alaska, the pastor Nathaniel Jolly posted photographs to Twitter of a pirate-themed frozen yogurt shop he used to own with his wife. “Now, for the SBC!” he wrote, appending a flag emoji to the message.

Mr. Jolly, who will attend his first annual meeting, watched with alarm as public schools in his area have begun to teach what he describes as critical race theory. And he was shocked when high-profile leaders in his own denomination endorsed aspects of the sprawling racial protest movement last summer. “I think C.R.T. is one of these destructive heresies that have snuck in,” he said, referring to a passage in the New Testament book of 2 Peter about false teachers who bring “swift destruction on themselves.”

The rebellion in the Southern Baptist Convention both reflects and forecasts what is going on in broader society and the Republican Party, said Jemar Tisby, assistant director of narrative and advocacy at the Boston University Center for Antiracist Research.

In the wake of the racial justice protests and the ongoing disinformation about the election, there has been “a sifting” going on in the church over race and justice in particular, he said.

“The annual meeting is an opportunity for denominational leaders either to sensitively address the concerns and racism that Black people have experienced or to side with the status quo which favors white people, particularly men,” he said.

The denomination has about 14.5 million members but has been steadily shrinking for the past decade. In 2014, about 85 percent of Southern Baptists were white, 6 percent were Black and 3 percent were Latino, according to the Pew Research Center.

Southern Baptists split from their northern counterparts in 1845 in support of slavery. After the denomination repudiated its role in slavery in the 1990s, a portion of its national leaders have attempted to diversify its churches and seminaries. At its 2019 meeting, the convention affirmed that critical race theory could be an “analytical tool” useful to faithful Christians, a move that many conservatives describe as alarming. Its current president, J.D. Greear, urged Southern Baptists last summer to declare that “Black lives matter.”

Some high-profile Southern Baptists have also pushed back on some strictures against female church leadership. One of the denomination’s largest congregations, Saddleback Church in Southern California, quietly ordained three women as staff pastors in May, a move that outraged conservatives.

Conservatives have spent months drumming up turnout. The Conservative Baptist Network, an increasingly influential group founded last year, released a recent video urging Baptists to “stop the drift” by coming to Nashville. Some Baptists planned to gather at rallying sites before the big event. Outside Dallas, 1,600 pastors registered for Wokeness and the Gospel, a conference that warned of the perils of what organizers call “the new moralism.”



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The most high-profile vote at the meeting will be the election of a new president, a race whose leading candidates are Mike Stone, a Georgia pastor who is the favorite of many conservatives, including Mr. Nelson and Mr. Jolly; Ed Litton, an Alabama pastor who has largely avoided culture war battles and has the support of the denomination's first Black president; and Albert Mohler Jr., a lion of the denomination who helped usher in a conservative revolution decades ago and is now in the awkward position of being labeled a moderate "compromise candidate." Mr. Stone, a onetime underdog, is considered a serious contender.

No matter which side emerges triumphant from the meeting next week, a schism looms.

"A lot of us will know if this convention is for us once it is over," said Dwight McKissic, pastor of Cornerstone Baptist Church in Arlington, Texas, who has been leading antiracism efforts in the denomination. If Mr. Mohler or Mr. Stone wins the presidency, or if resolutions are passed that affirm racism, in his view, he will leave. Several other Black pastors have announced their departures within the past year.

Hostility over critical race theory among the Southern Baptists, which came to the foreground after Thanksgiving when seminary presidents denounced it, is interwoven with its weaponization by the G.O.P., he said.

"The litmus test now for being a Baptist is you have to denounce C.R.T. as they do?" he said. "We would be completely off our rockers to submit, give that kind of power to a white denomination, particularly on the subject of race."

The convention has historically reflected divisions in the country. The most recent meeting, two years ago in Birmingham, Ala., focused on sexual abuse in evangelical churches. The year before, tensions were political. Mike Pence, then the country's vice president, gave a keynote address to rally evangelical support for Mr. Trump ahead of the midterm elections.



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The denomination vowed at its convention two years ago to address sexual abuse in its congregations, but many victims' advocates have warned that little has changed. Southern Baptist leaders have also not publicly addressed an allegation of abuse at one of its most prominent megachurches, the Village Church in Texas.

In one of two fiery letters that leaked after his departure, Mr. Moore accused leaders including Mr. Stone of impeding the denomination's attempts to root out abusers, and of "bullying and intimidation" toward survivors of sexual abuse. (Mr. Stone responded in a video statement, calling the letter "as inflammatory as it is inaccurate.") Later, an ally of Mr. Moore released audio recordings of meetings that included Mr. Moore, Mr. Stone and others debating how to handle abuse, with another high-placed leader, Ronnie Floyd, saying his priority was not to worry about survivor reactions but rather to "preserve the base." (In a statement, Mr. Floyd apologized and said his remarks were mischaracterized.)

Opponents of the conservative campaign are not as centrally organized, with a less targeted voter turnout operation. Last month, their preferred candidate, Mr. Litton, held question-and-answer sessions for about 30 pastors in West Virginia over takeout Chick-fil-A, and another for a similar group in Baton Rouge, La.

No matter what happens in Nashville, the conservatives are pressing on to strengthen their institutional and cultural power. Tom Ascol, who leads Founders Ministries, an influential conservative group, has been hosting regular calls with fellow pastors who are newly engaged in the fight.

Next year Founders will host a conference called Militant and Triumphant, whose website makes its ambitions plain:

“We indeed do not wage war against flesh and blood, but we do wage war.”

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