

Senior Pastor

Fred Luter, Jr.

Pastor Fred Luter, Jr. was elected the Southern Baptist Convention's first African American Vice President in 2011, and he made history again when he became SBC's first ever African American President at the annual meeting held in his hometown of New Orleans on Tuesday, June 19, 2012.

The Southern Baptist Convention was founded in 1845. It is the largest protestant organization in America with over 16 million members and 45,000 churches. However, the predominantly white organization's history is steeped in their support of slavery and segregation, so Luter's ascension to the top post signals an overall desire by some members to change the culture and brand of the SBC.

While Luter's new position as president of SBC is historic, he has a long history with Southern Baptists. It all came together in what Luter calls his "Road to Damascus" moment, referring to the apostle Paul's conversion experience in the Bible. An avid motorcyclist, Luter was involved in a horrific accident in 1977 that left him hospitalized with compound fractures and serious head injuries. He said that after surviving the accident, he realized he wanted to go into the ministry. Luter, who was born and raised in New Orleans' lower Ninth Ward, had been active in the church as a child, and in 1977, he made a conscious decision to give his life to Christ. With no church to preach in, Luter set up shop every Saturday at noon on the corner of Galvez and Caffin Avenue where he would preach to anyone who would listen. He preached his first church Sermon in 1983 at the Law Street Baptist Church in New Orleans' Seventh Ward. By 1986, he was preaching regularly at Greater Liberty Baptist Church when he heard about the opening for a pastor at Franklin Avenue Baptist Church.

By now, Luter's preaching had gained him a reputation, and the 65 members at Franklin Avenue Baptist Church quickly approved their new minister. Franklin Avenue Baptist Church was originally an all-white church, but as whites moved out of the neighborhood, a result of urban renewal, the congregation at FABC changed to mostly African American members. So, in 1986, Fred Luter, Jr. took the helm at the small struggling church. Luter quickly went to work, creating an outreach strategy he referred to as "FRANgelism." (Friends – Relatives – Associates – Neighbors). Everybody needs to be a missionary. It's about making the main thing the main thing, and that's bringing people to Christ," said the affable pastor. Luter also focused his attention on bringing men into the fold. He felt that if you could get men to church, the women will come. "The man is the head of the family. If he comes to church he's going to bring his family with him," said Luter. In the beginning to get more men involved Luter would do things like have 20 or 30 guys over to his home to watch a sporting event and then make his pitch for God. "When Sugar Ray Leonard and Tommy Hearns fought, I had about 25 guys at the house that night. Many of them are still with us."

By 1989, Fred Luter had grown his church to over 300 members. In 1994, practically bursting at the seams, Luter and his congregation began plans to build a new church. Over the next three years, through regular tithes and offerings the FABC faithful had raised enough money to begin construction of their new facility—one that would seat 1,500 people. The word was out about this fireball of a preacher in the upper Ninth Ward who not only talked the talk, but also walked the walk, and as Luter's reputation grew so did his congregation, ultimately reaching more than 7,000 members by 2005.

Over the next few years, FABC hummed along with the velocity of one of Luter's supercharged sermons. But on August 29th, 2005, the church and the rest of New Orleans would be forced to a screeching halt by Hurricane Katrina. Located in the upper Ninth Ward, FABC took on more than eight feet of water. The church was destroyed and members were scattered all over the U.S., struggling to comprehend what had happened while considering the possibility of having to build new lives elsewhere.

Fred Luter, however, would not rest. He began the painstaking process of trying to locate his members and get them home. He travelled all over the United States, preaching in cities where they were. New FABC's sprang up in cities like Baton Rouge, Louisiana and Houston, Texas, but Luter wasn't satisfied. He wanted a church in New Orleans to serve those members who had managed to make it back home. Luter's call would be answered by Pastor David Crosby of the First Baptist Church in the Lakeview section of New Orleans. Crosby's large church was spared the major devastation that FABC experienced and was able to reopen within a few months. The two pastors struck a deal and in the process struck on a friendship that both say will last a lifetime. For the next three years, Luter held 7 a.m. services at Crosby's church, all the while rebuilding his own. In fact, it will be Crosby who nominates Luter for the presidency of the Southern Baptist Convention next month.

On April 6th, 2008, Pastor Fred Luter, Jr. danced around the pulpit with tears in his eyes, and welcomed his congregation back to their newly build sanctuary. Many in his congregation said had it not been for Luter's selflessness and inspirational leadership, they would have lost their God-centered orientation and been unable to come home to begin restoring their lives and one of America's great cities. Between 2008 and now, membership at FABC has continued to grow. So much so, that the church has outgrown itself and is now in the middle of a capital campaign to raise the money to build a larger sanctuary.

As Luter prepares to accept the mantle of leadership at SBC, he is not naïve about the organization's past. In 1986 when he took over FABC, his congregation was discussing leaving the SBC. In a move that could be described as fortuitous, he told his organization that he believed "this convention had a heart for evangelism, for discipleship and reaching people in difficult times." Not knowing what would happen years later, he convinced them to stay. Now, he is prepared to make history as their first African American President. "I trust him," says friend Crosby. "His presidency is not going to be about him. It's going to be about the health of our convention. And we need his help. We need his perspective. We need his wisdom." Luter says that it's a new day in the Southern Baptist Convention.

“Our doors are open to each and everybody, no matter the color, no matter the creed, no matter the background, this convention’s doors are open and our churches are open to whosoever will, let them come.”

Fred Luter, Jr. was born in New Orleans on November 11, 1956. He is the middle child of five siblings. He has been married to his “prime rib”, Sister Elizabeth Luter for the past 32 years. They have a son, Fred “Chip” (Jasmine) Luter (also a pastor) two grandchildren, Fred IV and Zoe Grace and a daughter, Kimberly Luter Terrell (Howard).