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ENID, Okla. (ABP)—Wade Burleson is calling for the Southern Baptist Convention to investigate “manipulation” and “coercion” by his fellow trustees of the International Mission Board.

But the Oklahoma pastor backed down from his threat to publish details of those alleged abuses on his blog, saying a formal SBC-level investigation is “a better road” that will allow “for all to defend their actions before things are made public.”

“I know that not everyone will be pleased with my decision not to go public with details that serve as the basis for this recommendation,” he wrote in his blog June 1, “but I have an absolutely clear conscience that I am doing exactly what the Lord would have me do.”

Burleson, pastor of Emmanuel Baptist Church in Enid, is a first-year trustee of the International Mission Board, the SBC’s flagship agency, which selects and directs Southern Baptists’ 5,000 global missionaries—the largest missionary force of its kind in the world.

Earlier this year, IMB trustees accused Burleson of using his blog to violate trustee confidentiality, prompting them to try to have him removed from the board. He complained he never was given the chance to hear the specific allegations or respond to them. After an outcry from the SBC's rank and file, the trustees let Burleson stay on the board, but they passed a policy forbidding dissent.

In a June 1 posting on his blog, Burleson said a motion will be introduced at the June 13-14 annual Southern Baptist Convention calling for appointment of a seven-member ad hoc committee to investigate "five concerns":

"Manipulation of the nominating process" by which the Southern Baptist Convention elects IMB trustees.

Attempts "by one or more" chief executives of SBC agencies "to influence and/or coerce the IMB trustees, staff, and administration"—an apparent reference to Paige Patterson, president of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary.

The appropriateness of closed-door meetings—"forums and executive sessions"—by IMB trustees, "as compared to conducting business in full view of the Southern Baptist Convention," and the exclusion of "any individual trustee" from meetings of the full board without SBC approval.

Imposing "new doctrinal requisites" on IMB employees and missionaries that go "beyond the 2000 Baptist Faith and Message," the SBC's conservative doctrinal statement required of all missionaries—a reference to the IMB's much-criticized policies against private prayer languages and defining an appropriate baptism.

"Suppression of dissent" among trustees, such as the IMB's new policy that prohibits any trustee or employee from publicly criticizing board decisions.

Dozens of motions are introduced each year at the SBC annual meeting.

Most are rejected, ruled out of order or referred to the affected agency. Burleson's motion, however, invokes SBC Bylaw 26B, which will require messengers to vote on the motion during their two-day meeting rather than refer it to another body. Invoking Bylaw 26B reportedly would require approval by two thirds of the messengers voting, however.

It is unclear who would appoint the investigation committee, but it could be the SBC's newly elected president. The motion requires the committee to bring a progress report to the SBC Executive Committee and its final report to the next Southern Baptist Convention meeting in June 2007.

Burleson insisted an SBC investigation would be the fairest way to address his allegations against his colleagues. In the meantime, however, he said he will continue to serve on the board and to blog about his experiences.

"Blogging has been my attempt to energize and mobilize grassroots Southern Baptists in their understanding of, and participation with, the International Mission Board's ministries through a greater comprehension and appreciation of the IMB's work," he wrote.

Burleson's conflict with his fellow trustees started last December when he used his blog to criticize their adoption of two new regulations against missionary candidates' use of private prayer languages—considered a form of tongues-speaking—and requiring prospective missionaries to be baptized by churches that affirm certain doctrinal beliefs. Burleson and others say those requirements are excessively narrow.

The majority of trustees—meeting in a closed-door session—voted in January to ask the SBC to take the unprecedented action of removing Burleson from the board. In March, they rescinded that request but barred Burleson from serving on any committees, which are the primary mechanism for trustee involvement. They also asked him to stop blogging and to apologize in front of the trustee board. He has done neither. But he

says he will apologize for any demonstrated breaches of policy.

At the trustees' most recent meeting in May, their executive committee accused him of a new, unspecified violation of trustee confidentiality, again related to a closed-door meeting. Chairman Tom Hatley of Arkansas barred Burleson from attending all future closed-door sessions.

Burleson, on his blog, initially said he would accept that punishment. But he changed his mind two days later, writing May 26 that he would defy Hatley's ban by attending all sessions of the full board. He also said he was considering revealing details of his IMB experience, which he said proved some trustees violated the board's rules against caucusing and demonstrated an organized effort to undermine IMB president Jerry Rankin.

It is unclear what allegations Burleson would make about behind-the-scenes interference by Paige Patterson and other SBC agency leaders. However, Patterson circulated a lengthy report by a seminary professor critical of the IMB's direction under Rankin.

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