

SBC strategist for gender issues coordinates ministry to homosexuals

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SAN ANTONIO—Pastor Bob Stith—who said God convicted him more than a decade ago about his judgmental attitudes and how he condemned homosexuals—has been named Southern Baptists' national strategist for gender issues.

Stith, pastor of Carroll Baptist Church in Southlake, Texas, since 1970, accepted the newly created position effective June 1. LifeWay Christian Resources is funding the post, and the Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission is providing administrative oversight.

Stith's primary emphasis will be to model a ministry to gays that goes beyond condemnation. "When pastors and churches aren't sure how to deal with it, they usually deal with it wrongly," Stith said. "I understand because I was there; I did those things."

LifeWay President Emeritus Jimmy Draper called the strategist role the

“culmination of many years of planning and praying.” Draper and ERLC President Richard Land were named co-chairs of a task force on ministry to homosexuals in 2002. The task force was charged with being “proactive and redemptive in reaching out to those who struggle with same-sex attractions,” Land explained.

While affirming biblical texts that label homosexuality as sin, Draper said that belief “does not relieve us of the loving response and ministry to those who face this kind of temptation.”

As SBC leaders sought a national strategist, Land said Stith’s congregation “is one of those churches that is most active in reaching out proactively and redemptively.” He added that Stith “is the one who really has had a vision for how churches can do this.”

Stith, a graduate of Samford University and Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, said God convicted him in 1994 about his attitude of “condemnation and judgment” in his preaching about homosexuality. People struggling with same-sex attractions “would not have come to me for help,” he acknowledged.

“One of the things God really put on my heart is the fact that there are so many people in our churches who struggle with this and they do so silently” because of fear of condemnation and rejection, Stith told reporters in a June 13 press conference during the Southern Baptist Convention.

Responding to a question about anticipated ministry strategies, Stith said: “We don’t specifically have an outline of telling churches this is what you do. We are more interested in helping them learn how to receive people who are struggling with this.

“What our church did from the beginning was for me to acknowledge that my attitude was wrong,” he explained. “We should reach out to them with compassion. ... Basically what we have done is to love them with the love of

Christ.”

One of the goals to help Southern Baptist churches minister effectively to homosexuals “is to show them a Baptist church that looks a lot like their Baptist church” that is involved in effective ministry efforts, Land added.

Convention leaders plan to “develop a strategy and we’re going to seek to be ministering redemptively and compassionately to this issue, which is a problem in a lot of our churches,” Land said. He added that “the pulpit is not immune” to the issue of same-sex attractions.

Stith noted many churches separate homosexuality “as a sin that is different from other sins, and consequently we isolate” individuals who struggle with same-sex attractions. By contrast, he added, “I don’t think God makes a distinction between sins.”

While agreeing that “I don’t think there’s a hierarchy of sins in terms of separating us from our fellowship with God,” Land said, “I think that clearly the Bible is very specific in its condemnation of homosexual behavior.”

As SBC leaders seek to encourage and equip churches to minister “to those who are struggling with unwanted same-sex attractions,” the SBC constitution prohibits convention involvement by churches “which act to affirm, approve or endorse homosexual behavior.” Additionally, the 2000 Baptist Faith & Message statement of faith urges Christians to oppose “all forms of sexual immorality, including adultery, homosexuality and pornography.”

Noting that churches don’t affirm pedophilia or adultery, Land said, “Unfortunately, we do have some churches in the Southern Baptist Convention that have attempted to affirm a homosexual lifestyle.

“We’re at a rather odd moment in our nation’s cultural history where some things are clearly condemned by Scripture that some churches want to

openly affirm,” Land added. “I think that’s the reason for singling out” homosexuality as an issue for Southern Baptist churches to address, he explained.

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