

# Barber urges SBC to remember and learn from history

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NASHVILLE, Tenn. (RNS)—The fall meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention’s Executive Committee began with prayer, some hard news and calls for unity after years of turmoil and change.

Those attending also got a history lesson about how the denomination overcame a crisis a century ago, with the hope that lessons from the past could inspire unity in the present.

“When all the dozens of reasons to throw in the towel and abandon our one sacred effort were easy to find, we chose instead to search hard for reasons to lean in and cooperate harder,” SBC President Bart Barber told the Executive Committee trustees.

Meeting in a hotel ballroom a few miles from the committee’s offices, about 80 trustees—the body that oversees the day-to-day governance of the SBC—gathered for the first time in person since the committee’s leader resigned after admitting he had faked his resume.

Willie McLaurin, who was serving as the Executive Committee’s interim president and CEO, resigned Aug. 17 after a committee vetting him as a candidate for the permanent position discovered the fraud. McLaurin was the fourth person to lead the Executive Committee since 2018, and the third to step down amid controversy.

His departure was followed by news last week that five staffers and two contractors had been laid off due to the committee’s troubled finances.

## **‘A cost to doing the right thing’**

Jonathan Howe, who has filled in as temporary interim leader since McLaurin’s departure, told trustees the committee’s reserves had dropped from nearly \$14 million two years ago to about \$4 million today. The committee will need to draw on additional reserves to balance its budget this year.

Committee members also learned this week retired Kentucky pastor Dan Summerlin had been nominated to replace Howe as interim president and CEO, but he withdrew his name from consideration.

The search for a permanent leader—now nearly 2 years old—continues, with the search committee hoping to identify a candidate by February 2024. The committee is also expected to discuss an internal investigation into McLaurin’s tenure, likely in executive session.

Since 2019, the SBC has been reckoning with political divides, fights over doctrine, leadership failures and a sexual abuse crisis.

Members of the committee have been divided over how to respond to the ongoing crisis, with some warning a transparent investigation into SBC leaders’ management of sexual abuse might lead to financial ruin and others quitting in protest.

Howe gave a nod to some of the challenges the committee has faced in his report and to the recent layoffs.

“There is a cost to doing the right thing,” Howe said.

Howe also called for trustees to band together to act with humility to fulfill their mission, reminding them they serve the denomination’s churches, from the smallest rural congregation to the largest megachurch.

“We serve the Southern Baptist Convention,” he said. “It does not serve us.”

## **Update on Ministry Check database of abusers**

Oklahoma pastor Mike Keahbone gave an update from a task force charged with implementing a number of reforms meant to address sexual abuse in the denomination. Chief among those reforms is setting up a “Ministry Check” database of abusive pastors.

Work on that database continues, but no names have been added to it so far. Keahbone said no date had been set yet for when names would be added but added he hoped it would be soon. He also said the volunteer task force is committed to making SBC churches safer for everyone.

Along with the work on the database, Keahbone said the task force has partnered with state conventions on abuse prevention tools. They are also searching for an entity that can oversee abuse prevention on a permanent basis.

“We will not retreat from this fight,” he said.

## **Looking back a century**

Barber, pastor of First Baptist Church in Farmersville, closed the evening with a call for Southern Baptists to rise above their current troubles. He began his report by promising not to preach. Instead, he gave a history lesson to trustees, reminding them of the denomination’s troubles in the 1920s and 1930s.

At that time, he said, Southern Baptists faced financial crisis, doctrinal

divides and failed leadership, including a pair of leaders who embezzled more than a million dollars from the convention's two missionary boards.

Southern Baptists, he said, also faced a political crisis. After winning the battle to ban alcohol with the passage of the 18th Amendment in 1919, they faced a backlash against Prohibition, only to see the Democratic Party, which they then supported, nominate New York Gov. Al Smith, who was both Catholic and "an imbiber," Barber said.

In the 1930s, the Great Depression derailed a major campaign to fund missions and one of the SBC's prominent seminaries was set to close when a last-minute infusion of cash saved it, said Barber, who called the era "the moment of our deepest despair."

When all seemed lost, Baptists created what is now known as the Cooperative Program, a shared mission funding program, and the statement of faith, known as the Baptist Faith and Mission, to bind them together.

Today, with Baptists once again facing division, financial woes, political turmoil, doctrinal divides and a crisis of leadership, Barber called on his fellow SBC leaders to once again overcome those challenges with a common mission.

"We do not lack money. We do not lack planning. We do not lack opportunity," Barber said. "God help us, what we lack is inspiration."

Barber, who recently appointed a "cooperation group" to help the SBC move forward, asked his fellow trustees to stop following those who want to tear things down and instead work together.

"The dream of cooperation carried us through the 1920s and 1930s, and it will carry us through the 2020s too," he said.