

Candidate to head SBC Executive Committee withdraws

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NASHVILLE (RNS)—The Southern Baptist Convention has failed again in its search for a new leader for its Executive Committee, which handles the denomination's business between annual meetings.

The committee announced Jan. 23 the leading candidate for the president and CEO of the Executive Committee has withdrawn. He is the second prospective top executive whose candidacy failed.

The search committee kept the candidate's identity confidential. However, as Baptist Press reported on Jan. 24, Thomas Hammond, executive director of the Georgia Baptist Mission Board, sent an email to his board's executive committee Jan. 23 in which he revealed he had been selected as the candidate to lead the SBC Executive Committee but had withdrawn his name.

"You may be aware that I was asked to be considered as a candidate for the role of President & CEO of the SBC Executive Committee," he told leaders in the email, adding that he and his wife Kerri had been open to the opportunity but that "over the past week, it has become clear that God's will is for us to remain in Georgia."

Members of the team searching for a new permanent Executive Committee leader had planned to present the candidate for a vote February 19-20 in Nashville. But the candidat withdrew after "much prayer, fasting, and a desire to be in the center of God's will," according to Baptist Press.

The Executive Committee has been without a permanent leader since the fall of 2021, when former Arkansas megachurch pastor Ronnie Floyd

resigned as CEO and president after losing a battle over an investigation into the SBC's handling of sexual abuse.

After Floyd resigned, former staffer Willie McLaurin stepped in as interim CEO and hoped to be named to the post. However, the search committee learned in its vetting of McLaurin he had falsified his resume.

Jonathan Howe currently serves as interim president and CEO. Howe had been named as a temporary fill-in when McLaurin resigned but remained in the role after another interim candidate bowed out last fall.

Howe is expected to remain as interim.

"Despite this development, I commend the search team for their diligent work seeking the next SBC Executive Committee president and CEO," Howe said. "This team has exemplified grace under pressure as they face their difficult task in the light of the current challenges across the convention.

"I encourage Southern Baptists to continue to pray for these leaders as they move forward and to pray for the EC staff as they continue carrying out the work tasked to us by the convention."

The Executive Committee has had five top leaders since 2018, including a pair of permanent leaders who resigned in the face of controversy. The committee has struggled in recent years in the wake of a major sex-abuse scandal in the SBC.

In May 2023, a previous search team had nominated Arlington pastor Jared Wellman, a former Executive Committee trustee, for the top role. But a vote to confirm Wellman failed.

EDITOR'S NOTE: The article was edited to add the third and fourth paragraphs after new information became available.