

ERLC board affirms staff, seeks to ‘listen to churches’

September 11, 2024

The staff of the Southern Baptist Convention’s Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission heard an official word of affirmation Sept. 11 with the release of a [statement approved by the agency’s board of trustees](#) in a two-hour executive session the day before during the annual meeting in Nashville.

The statement affirms the work of ERLC president Brent Leatherwood and the 17 other staff members, noting the importance of “bringing light and hope to the public square.”

The statement also emphasizes how ERLC’s role is to keep the churches informed about the pressing moral issues and urges staff “to be cautious when addressing controversial political issues by allowing [Leatherwood’s [advocacy assessment filter](#)] to serve as the guide in choosing the wording of the response.”

Leatherwood explained during the Sept. 10 afternoon plenary session of the meeting how he and the team have used the framework outlined in the advocacy assessment since the beginning of his time in the president’s seat.

Both Leatherwood and interim trustee chair Tony Beam of South Carolina acknowledged the concern about ERLC being the focus of a vote for shutting down the entity during the SBC annual meeting in June.

While the motion failed to receive the mandated two-thirds vote of messengers for approval to then go before the 2025 messengers for the final confirmation vote, the fact that the motion was made has ERLC board and staff evaluating policies and procedures.

The board seeks “to support the team at the ERLC, as well as listen to our churches, as together we navigate a turbulent political climate,” Beam said in a statement. “We pray that the [public release of both the advocacy assessment and the affirmation and encouragement statement, which were] affirmed by the trustees, will assist and encourage the ERLC president and staff in speaking clearly and boldly to the issues of the day.

“[We also pray the statements] inform the churches in a transparent way, how the ERLC makes decisions about how they address the issues.”

In other business

During the Sept. 11 morning plenary session of the board meeting, a second executive session was held for roughly 45 minutes.

The result was two motions approved by trustees:

- “The trustees acknowledge that Brent Leatherwood’s salary has been presented to the full board by the executive committee [of the ERLC] and reviewed by the trustees as stated in the bylaws.”
- “That we affirm the ERLC’s existing conflict of interest policy and encourage trustees and staff to follow this policy. We also encourage trustees and staff to report violations of this policy. Trustees who violate the conflict of interest are subject to board censure and staff are subject to disciplinary action.”

No context was provided related to the conflict of interest motion, but some board members have been the subject of media reports and social media discussions in recent years related to allegedly “leaking” material and forcing discussions beyond the trustee board meetings. The conflict of interest/standard of conduct policy is in Article VII of the [ERLC bylaws](#).

Trustees also elected new officers and subcommittee chairs: Scott Foshie of

Illinois, chair; Amy Pettway of Florida, vice chair; and Anthony Cox of Arizona, secretary; Heather Sells of Virginia, communications chair; Matthew Morgan of Mississippi, administration and finance chair; and Mitch Kimbrell of Vermont, research and public policy chair.

Trustees approved two new temporary trustees to fill the vacancies on the board:

Jon Nelson, lead pastor of Soma Community Church in Jefferson City, Mo., will take the at-large seat left vacant with the resignation of Kevin Smith of Florida, who was serving as board chair until the July [confusion related to Leatherwood's position](#).

Todd Brooks, pastor of Smith Rock Community Church in Terrebonne, Ore., will take the Northwest seat left vacant by Michael Lerma, who needed to resign following the recent death of his wife.

Nelson, who previously served on the SBC's Abuse Reform Implementation Task Force, and Brooks are allowed to serve until the next slate of new trustee nominations are presented to SBC messengers during the 2025 annual meeting.

In response to a motion referred to the ERLC from the SBC annual meeting, the board affirmed it will continue serving churches in the area of sexual abuse reform efforts.

"Sexual abuse is an affront to the cause of Christ, especially when it takes place within the church," board members stated. "The ERLC will continue to serve churches regarding this issue and call on them and others to take this grave issue seriously as we care for victims of abuse and provide a witness to a watching world that the Lord calls us to this ministry of reconciliation."

With the disbanding of the implementation task force in June, the \$250,000

allotted for its work comes back to ERLC and will be used for future sexual abuse reform efforts conducted by the commission.