

ERLC officers: Task force probe ‘divisive and disrespectful’

February 24, 2020

NASHVILLE (BP)—Officers of the board of trustees of the Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission strongly objected to the formation of a task force to study the ERLC’s effectiveness and instructed the entity and its leadership “not to comply” with the inquiry.

In an open letter to SBC Executive Committee Chairman Mike Stone and Executive Committee members, the ERLC trustee officers called the task force, which was formed by the EC earlier this week, “unwarranted, divisive, and disrespectful.”

Signed by David Prince, chair of the ERLC board of trustees, and the board’s other officers, the letter suggested the Executive Committee was attempting to usurp the role delegated to the ERLC’s trustees and included a statement of support for ERLC president Russell Moore.

“We find the action of the Executive Committee ... disappointing, unnecessary and harmful to our cooperative work in the SBC,” the ERLC trustee officers wrote, adding: “At a time where a unified voice is needed for our cooperative Gospel work, the Executive Committee is sowing needless division, treating trustees with disrespect, and spreading suspicion with this unnecessary task force.”

Executive Committee members voted Feb. 18 to form the seven-member task force, which will be headed by Stone.

It is designed to address concerns that “have been expressed both publicly and privately to various members of the Executive Committee and other Southern Baptists regarding how the Ethics & Religious Liberty

Commission's actions in relation to its ministry statements are affecting the convention and its relationships with local churches, local associations, and state conventions."

Executive Committee officers respond

In a written response to the ERLC trustee officers' letter, the officers of the SBC Executive Committee noted that the action "passed unanimously among the (Executive Committee) officers, unanimously in subcommittee, and by an overwhelming majority" of the full committee.

"We respect the right of the ERLC trustees and chairman Prince to respond to the SBC Executive Committee's formation of a study task force," the Executive Committee officers wrote in the response. "It was never our intention to communicate disrespect or seek to divide. This is not an attempt to remove Dr. Moore or to direct his staff.

"We believe in the trustee system and understand clearly that Dr. Moore's presidency and the work of his team are matters for the ERLC board of trustees."

But the response also noted the Executive Committee has a responsibility to "present and recommend the SBC Cooperative Program Allocation" to messengers at the SBC annual meeting, and "to promote the entire Cooperative Program."

In 2017, the Executive Committee created a similar task force. A 13-member ad hoc committee was tasked with monitoring the activities of Southern Baptist entities in relation to how their activities might adversely affect the Cooperative Program and churches.

It received reports then from executive directors of state Baptist conventions that 75 churches across the SBC "were withholding,

designating or escrowing Cooperative Program funds.” While only 14 churches were confirmed by the committee, those 14 were estimated to have diverted a total of about \$1.5 million away from the Cooperative Program.

The most recent action to form a task force specifically stated three bylaw responsibilities, beginning with its responsibility to recommend the Cooperative Program Allocation Budget annually to the SBC, as required by SBC Bylaw 18.E(6).

The Executive Committee also is tasked with studying or making recommendations to entities, and the convention when advisable, concerning adjustments required by ministry statements or by established convention policies and practices, as described in SBC Bylaw 18.E(9).

Finally, the Executive Committee is directed by the SBC to present to the convention recommendations required to clarify the responsibilities of the entities for ministries and other functions, as provided in SBC Bylaw 18.E(13).

Shortly after the Executive Committee vote to create the task force, Stone noted the prevalence of “fake news” about the ERLC, and said the task force would be “looking for the facts.”

“We are hearing from state leadership and other pastors across the country,” he said then. “We are making a statement about effectiveness.”

‘A vote of no confidence’

But among several objections, the ERLC trustee officers said the action “inappropriately seizes the responsibility and work of the ERLC trustees,” that “evaluating the effectiveness of Dr. Moore and the ERLC team is uniquely the work of the trustees of the ERLC, and that formation of the

task force was “a vote of no confidence” in ERLC trustees, “which is both insulting and ... inappropriate and out of step with Southern Baptist cooperation.”

In response, the Executive Committee officers said: “When we continue to hear a growing number of reports that churches are either planning to decrease or withhold Cooperative Program gifts and are given specific reasons that relate to a Southern Baptist entity, we have a responsibility that we are granted under the bylaws of the SBC to consider those reports.”

Citing Bylaw 18.E(9), the ERLC trustee officers said the EC had failed to “maintain open channels of communication” with ERLC trustees as required. The letter also said the task force was “inappropriately formed” in executive session and suggested the task force “overrules the will” of SBC messengers.

Other than Stone, the task force’s membership, which will be drawn from the Executive Committee’s 83 current members, has not been announced. The task force is required to report its findings to the EC “on or before its September 2020 meeting.”

Stone said the action created “a formal process by which we can receive information and determine the level that this issue is affecting the Cooperative Program.”

Stone added: “I’m fully aware that we may find, as we did in 2017, that what we are hearing is not as significant in fact as it is in perception.”

The letter from the ERLC trustee officers cited Stone’s comments on the 2017 study as evidence that another review is unnecessary. And citing a motion to defund the ERLC during the 2018 SBC Annual Meeting, which was rejected by an overwhelming margin, the letter stated:

“The question of the messengers’ support for the ERLC has been asked and answered. If the job of the Executive Committee is to carry on the work and represent the will of the business carried out at the annual meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention, this task force is doing the very opposite.”

The ERLC trustee officers also issued a strong statement of confidence in Moore, whose tenure has been polarizing in Southern Baptist circles for several reasons, including his position and commentary during the 2016 presidential election. They wrote:

“We grieve this task force in part because of the suspicion that it inevitably casts over Dr. Moore’s character. And we are firm in our belief that Dr. Moore’s character, convictions and theology are both biblical and unimpeachable.”