

ERLC reverses course, Brent Leatherwood not fired

July 23, 2024

(RNS)—In a head-scratching turn of events, the executive board of the Southern Baptist Convention’s public policy arm now says its leader has not been fired.

On Monday evening, July 22, the SBC Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission announced Brent Leatherwood, the group’s president, [had been fired](#)—a day after he praised President Joe Biden for ending his reelection bid.

Less than 12 hours later, the ERLC’s executive committee issued a [new statement](#) on Tuesday, saying Leatherwood would remain in leadership.

“Brent Leatherwood remains the President of the ERLC and has our support moving forward,” the statement read.

The committee also said ERLC board chair Kevin Smith had acted on his own in announcing that Leatherwood was fired. Smith, a former seminary professor and denominational administrator who currently pastors a church in Florida, has resigned as ERLC chair, according to the statement.

“There was not an authorized meeting, vote, or action taken by the Executive Committee,” the executive committee’s statement said.

Smith, who has served on the ERLC board since 2018, was elected chair last fall.

Smith's error

Smith, pastor of Family Church in West Palm Beach, Fla., did not immediately reply to a request for comment. He [told](#) Baptist Press, an official SBC publication, he had spoken with other members of the ERLC executive committee about removing Leatherwood and thought they agreed. He now said he was wrong.

“After multiple conversations with Executive Committee members of the ERLC, I was convinced in my mind that we had a consensus to remove Brent Leatherwood as the president of the ERLC. It is a delicate matter and, in an effort to deal with it expeditiously, I acted in good faith but without a formal vote of the Executive Committee,” he told Baptist Press. “This was an error on my part, and I accept full responsibility.”

The ERLC's bylaws [do allow](#) the executive committee to fire the entity's leader. The bylaws require 10 days' notice for special meetings of the board of trustees but do not detail notice requirements for executive committee meetings.

Smith is a former professor at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky., and a former executive director of the Baptist Convention of Maryland/Delaware. Smith told Baptist Press he resigned both as chair and as an ERLC trustee.

ERLC board response

A statement issued by the ERLC board of trustees the evening of July 23, acknowledged the board's failure “to fulfill [it's obligation to oversee the ERLC's ministry assignment] in ways that ensure the stability of this organization.”

The board affirmed its “support for the ERLC staff and their faithfulness in

fulfilling their assignment to our churches. This board stands behind the staff and will do everything in its power to ensure that the work of the organization—protecting a culture of life, championing God’s good design for marriage and sexuality, and defending a free church in a free state—continues uninterrupted.”

Referencing “the events of the last 24 hours,” the board stated Smith’s “decision to act” was unilateral and “outside of his authority as board chair.” Furthermore, “the members of the executive board were unaware of the chair’s actions until they received the email” sent by staff.

“While the executive committee recognizes a wide range of opinions on the work of the ERLC, most visible in a recent attempt to abolish the organization at the 2024 SBC annual meeting, the executive committee does not believe that this discontent rises to the level of a dismissible offense,” the statement continued.

The board also defended Leatherwood against accusations of “moral failing,” saying he is found “to be a man of utmost moral and ethical integrity.”

Trustees also wanted to make clear their retraction was “not about responding to pressure from outside organizations. As people who must give an account to God and Southern Baptists for how we have stewarded this commission, we have worked to ensure that every action taken follows the appropriate procedures affirmed by Southern Baptists.”

“Vice chair Tony Beam has assumed the responsibilities of chair of the board. The other members of the executive committee are: Amy Pettway, Anthony Cox, and Nathan Lugbill.

“As a board, our responsibility is to ensure that this commission can execute the task given to it by the messengers of the Southern Baptist Convention. We commit ourselves to that task” and to rebuilding trust in

“the executive committee, the trustee board” and the ERLC.

Praise for Leatherwood

Eric Costanzo, pastor of South Tulsa Baptist Church and an ERLC trustee board member, praised Leatherwood after it was announced the ERLC president was not fired.

“Brent deserves countless apologies for this error and all the assumptions that came with it,” [Costanzo wrote](#) on X. “He has proven to be a faithful leader and man of integrity time and again.”

The confusion over Leatherwood’s status is the latest crisis for the ERLC—which has been embroiled in seemingly endless controversy since the election of Donald Trump as U.S. president in 2016.

Criticism of ERLC

Several prominent megachurches withheld funding for the group after Leatherwood’s predecessor Russell Moore was critical of Trump, leading to [calls](#) for Moore to be fired.

That led to a meeting between Moore and Frank Page, who was then [head](#) of the SBC’s Nashville, Tenn.-based Executive Committee, where [the two pledged](#) to work together to unite Southern Baptists. Page later resigned in a scandal.

The SBC’s Executive Committee went on to [investigate](#) the ERLC in 2020 for allegedly being divisive and causing a shortfall in denominational donations. A 2021 report from the investigation, which was led by Georgia pastor Mike Stone, a fierce critic of Moore, [called](#) the ERLC “a significant distraction.”

Moore [resigned as ERLC president in May 2021](#), leaving the commission for a role at evangelical magazine *Christianity Today*, where he is now editor-in-chief.

Critics such as Florida pastor Tom Ascol, head of a Calvinist group called Founders Ministries, have repeatedly called for the ERLC to be shut down. This summer, Ascol made a [motion](#) to that effect at the SBC's annual meeting. The motion failed.

Criticism of Leatherwood

Leatherwood has been criticized for [opposing](#) legislation backed by Ascol and other members of the so-called abortion abolition movement that would have jailed women who have abortions. More recently, Leatherwood [criticized](#) the GOP for dropping anti-abortion language from its 2024 platform.

Leatherwood also called for gun law reforms after a shooting in March 2023 at a Nashville Christian school where his children were students.

He did not respond to requests for comment. Leatherwood [did](#) post his thanks on social media.

"I deeply appreciate everyone who has reached out, especially our trustees who were absolutely bewildered at what took place yesterday and jumped in to set the record straight," Leatherwood wrote Tuesday morning on X.

With additional reporting by Baptist Standard Editor Eric Black.

This is a breaking story and will be updated.