

ERLC trustees approve assessment of SBC sex abuse

September 20, 2021

NASHVILLE (BP)—Trustees of the Southern Baptist Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission committed the entity to an assessment of sexual abuse in the convention during their annual meeting Sept. 14-15.

The board approved without opposition a response to a motion referred to it at the SBC's 2021 June meeting by expressing its support of the request for the ERLC to engage an outside organization "to oversee and audit" such an appraisal.

In a later vote, the trustees passed, again without opposition, a motion to "set aside" \$250,000 as an initial commitment for the assessment.

The ERLC is "deeply grieved" by the reported sexual abuse and also grieved by the abuse of the past that went unreported because of the mishandling of those cases, the trustees said in their response to the motion at this year's SBC meeting requesting an assessment.

The response to the motion said the entity is committed to securing "the best oversight team and funding" needed for "a comprehensive and thorough" evaluation.

The motion offered by Indiana pastor Todd Benkert at the 2021 SBC annual meeting requested a three-year study, with preliminary reports by the ERLC at the next two annual convention meetings and a final report at the 2024 meeting.

The trustees said the ERLC will attempt to coordinate its assessment with a task force called for in a motion approved overwhelmingly by SBC

messengers in June. SBC President Ed Litton has named the task force members, who announced Sept. 9 they had selected Guidepost Solutions to conduct a third-party review of the SBC Executive Committee's handling of sexual abuse issues. Trustees committed the ERLC board and staff to "fully comply" with the investigation.

In other business, the ERLC trustees:

- Named Brent Leatherwood, the commission's chief of staff and vice president of external affairs, as acting president. Leatherwood succeeds Daniel Patterson, who served in that role after Russell Moore stepped down June 1 following eight years as the commission's president. Patterson, whose last day at the ERLC was Sept. 3, will be the new executive pastor at Central Baptist Church in College Station.
- Approved a candidate profile to guide the search for the entity's next president and initiated the process of receiving applications and recommendations for the office. The trustees endorsed a candidate profile consisting of eight criteria. The profile calls for the candidate to be: (1) spiritually mature; (2) a faithful servant; (3) convictionally Southern Baptist; (4) appropriately educated; (5) an excellent communicator; (6) pastoral in heart; (7) an experienced leader; and (8) a proven unifier. The committee will accept applications and recommendations until Nov. 30.
- Elected Lori Bova of New Mexico as trustee chair, making her the second female to serve in that role. Bova, a member of Taylor Memorial Baptist Church in Hobbs, N.M., served as vice chair the last two years. Eunie Smith of Alabama is the only previous woman to serve as chair.
- Endorsed former ERLC President Russell Moore for the Distinguished Service Award. Moore was cited for "his faithful and consistent witness" as the ERLC's president from 2013 to 2021. He

“helped move the ball forward on what it means to stand for life in all its stages” and promoted religious freedom for all Americans. Moore is now public theologian for *Christianity Today* and leads the evangelical magazine’s new Public Theology Project.

- Named Southern Baptist pastors Griffin Gullledge and Mark Dever as recipients of the John Leland Religious Liberty Award.

Gullledge, pastor of Madison Baptist Church in Madison, Ga., was recognized for his social-media advocacy for the Uyghur people and his drafting of a resolution approved at this year’s SBC meeting that condemned the Chinese Community Party’s treatment of them as genocide.

Dever, senior pastor of Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington, D.C., was recognized for his “model engagement with local authorities and his stand for religious liberty during the COVID-19 pandemic.” With Dever’s leadership, the church abided by the city’s restrictions on corporate worship by meeting outdoors outside the District of Columbia but filed suit when the government prohibited it from gathering outdoors in D.C. with safety measures while allowing gatherings of thousands for other events. A federal judge ruled in the church’s favor, and the government agreed in July to pay \$220,000 in legal fees.

Trustees heard reports from Elizabeth Graham, vice president of operations and life initiatives, and Jason Thacker, chair of research in technology ethics, and approved motions affirming the staff’s work in both areas.

Graham described the ERLC’s pro-life work, including the Road to Roe50, which she described as a “short-term strategy to engage the church” in a collaborative effort with other organizations leading to the 50th anniversary in January 2023 of the Roe v. Wade decision that legalized abortion nationwide. She described aged-based curriculum, a multi-stop tour in the fall of 2022 and a Washington, D.C., event in January 2023 as part of the Roe50 initiative.

“We need to make abortion illegal, but we need to make it unnecessary and unthinkable,” she told the trustees.

Thacker introduced the board to the Digital Public Square, a newly launched project to help the church think wisely about the challenging issues raised by technology. The effort, he said, will consist of such major elements as a “state of digital governance” report, an evangelical statement on content moderation and digital governance, a church resource kit and the publication of two books before 2023.

“The ERLC wants to equip Christians and the wider culture to make sense of an ever-changing digital culture and to gain wisdom to navigate the most challenging aspects of technology and social media—including the nature of religious freedom and free expression in the public square,” Thacker said.

Dealt with motions referred from SBC annual meeting

In responses to motions referred to the ERLC from the SBC’s 2021 meeting, the trustees:

- Affirmed in reply to a motion to study strategies to abolish abortion the commission’s work “toward the goal of ending abortion, both through legislation, litigation and ultimately working towards a culture where abortion is both unthinkable and unnecessary in our society. We deeply lament and oppose every legal effort to further protect or establish abortion in the United States, and we grieve the loss of lives for millions of preborn babies due to abortion.” In affirming the work of pregnancy resource centers and other pro-life efforts, the trustees said, “We should appreciate every step that can be taken—whether accomplished through legislative channels,

court decisions, or cultural developments—to save one additional preborn life.”

- Affirmed that offering puberty blockers and “transitioning hormones” to minors is “harmful and unethical” and said the ERLC has resources regarding the issue on its website and will continue to oppose federal efforts to approve sexual orientation and gender identity legislation.
- Postponed responses to motions referred to all SBC entities regarding audits and the use of non-disclosure agreements until more discussion occurs with the other entities.

Trustees approved a 2021-22 operating budget of \$3.912 million, about \$70,000 less than the previous budget. After 10 months of the current fiscal year, the ERLC had a net income of \$243,635 and total available cash of more than \$2.328 million. The trustees also approved a motion to affirm Bobby Reed for his 22 years of service as the commission’s chief financial officer.