

Judge orders Jurkovich's church to turn over financial records

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—A judge ordered a Louisiana church led by the spokesman for the Conservative Baptist Network—which claims the Southern Baptist Convention has become too liberal—to turn over nearly a decade of financial records to former members.

In a pair of court filings, members of First Baptist Church of Bossier, La., accused pastor Brad Jurkovich of diverting to the Conservative Baptist Network funds meant to support missionaries. They also allege Jurkovich blocked them from seeing church financial records, in violation of Louisiana nonprofit law, and that the pastor illegally changed the church's bylaws.

In late May, Judge Charles Smith of the 26th Judicial Court in Bossier Parish ruled the church had to turn over financial records dating back to 2013. Those records include bank statements, W-2 statements, paid invoices, purchase orders and bank deposits and transfers.

The church was also ordered to turn over details of staff housing allowances, names of staffers holding church credit cards and cellphones, and any loan documents or nondisclosure agreements related to the church.

Smith said in a May 27 ruling on a writ of mandamus the church could withhold information on donations and denied the former members access to the church's servers.

Long-running feud over finances and bylaws

The ruling is the latest development in a long-running feud at the church between Jurkovich and a group of members over finances and bylaws at First Baptist. According to a complaint filed in Louisiana court in mid-May, the feud began last summer after a group of members sent a letter to Jurkovich with a list of concerns, including staff turnover and lack of financial transparency.

The letter led Jurkovich to send an angry email telling the dissident members, “You either trust and follow the leadership or not,” according to the complaint. Jurkovich later agreed to allow the church members to see some church records, provided they sign a nondisclosure agreement. After signing the agreement, the two sides could not agree on what records would be available for review.

“On or around October 3, 2021, One Hundred Sixty-One (161) members of the congregation sent a letter, via email, to Dr. Jurkovich calling for his resignation over his misrepresentations, staffing turnover, personnel decisions, lack of accountability in FBB finances, and inability to lead,” according to the complaint.

Also at issue are changes made to the church’s bylaws in 2014, giving Jurkovich the ability to remove church members from the congregation, which had previously been a decision made by the church’s board of directors.

“The sole power to expel members of FBB is vested with Dr. Jurkovich, the self-appointed President/Chairman-for-life of FBB,” according to the complaint, which alleges the changes to the bylaws were not valid.

Mission funds allegedly diverted to CBN

The church members also claim Jurkovich failed to inform church members that funds meant for supporting missionaries instead were used to support the Conservative Baptist Network, where along with being spokesman, Jurkovich serves on the group's steering council.

"Upon information and belief, the mission funds which have been diverted from the Southern Baptist Convention to the Conservative Baptist Network are being used to fund the Conservative Baptist Network's operating expenses and to increase Dr. Jurkovich's standing Therein," according to the complaint.

Founded in 2020, the Conservative Baptist Network claims that liberals, critical race theory and female preachers have invaded the Southern Baptist Convention, and it vows to change the direction of the country's largest Protestant denomination. Last year, a Conservative Baptist Network-backed candidate narrowly lost the election for SBC president. The group currently backs Florida pastor Tom Ascol for president in the election scheduled for the SBC's June annual meeting.

Jurkovich did not respond to repeated emails and a voice message requesting comment. He did address the lawsuit during a First Baptist worship service on June 5, saying the church already agreed to turn over most of the documents before the court ruling.

He called the plaintiffs in the lawsuit "nonmembers" who had been causing trouble at the church for months. Jurkovich also told his church that the judge ruled the nondisclosure agreement between the church and the plaintiffs was still binding.

"This means that absolutely none of the information already produced or to

be produced over this ruling is to be shared or leaked," he said. "And if any of it is then this group will be held accountable legally."

Jurkovich also said the church had fought to keep giving information confidential, saying that tithing was between church members and God. He told church members if they hear any information about the church being discussed in public, they should report that to church leaders.

"Ultimately, we know that we're in a spiritual battle," he said. "And Satan wants to absolutely destroy this ministry. And I'm going to tell you right now in the name of Jesus, you cannot destroy his church. You can't do it. You can't do it."