

SBC Executive Committee disfellowships four churches

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NASHVILLE (BP)—The Southern Baptist Convention Executive Committee disfellowshipped four churches Feb. 23—two for their stance on homosexuality and two that employed sex offenders.

Towne View Baptist Church in Kennesaw, Ga., and St. Matthews Baptist Church, Louisville, Ky., were disfellowshipped for affirming homosexual behavior. Antioch Baptist Church in Sevierville, Tenn., was dropped for employing a pastor who confessed to two counts of statutory rape. West Side Baptist Church in Sharpsville, Pa., was disfellowshipped for employing as its pastor a registered sex offender.

The decisions came during an executive session following the recommendations of the SBC Credentials Committee. The decisions were announced in a plenary session at the close of the Executive Committee's two-day meeting in Nashville.

The SBC empowered the Credentials Committee in 2019 to make inquiries and recommendations for action regarding instances of sexual abuse, racism or other issues that call into question a church's relationship with the SBC.

"We take no pleasure in recommending that a church is not in friendly cooperation with the convention," Credentials Committee Chairman Mike Lawson told Baptist Press. "We would like nothing more than for all our churches to be in harmony on such vital issues. But when the available information shows clearly that we are not, it is necessary to take action.

"We are grieved, but we believe it was the right decision to recommend and

will continue to pray for all involved.”

The committee said both Towne View and St. Matthews have membership and leadership standards that “affirm homosexual behavior” and do not have a faith and practice that closely identify with the 2000 Baptist Faith and Message. The committee said Antioch and West Side do not behave “in a manner that is consistent with the convention’s beliefs regarding sexual abuse.”

Towne View Baptist

Towne View Pastor Jim Conrad told Baptist Press shortly after the vote that he regrets being disfellowshipped and will now evaluate the church’s relationship with the Georgia Baptist Mission Board and the Noonday Association.

“We have not been notified of (the Executive Committee’s) decision, but we regret it,” he said. “We are grateful for our relationship with the churches of the Southern Baptist Convention over the history of our church, and we remain committed to share God’s love in and through Jesus with everybody and to welcome anybody who can profess Jesus as Lord into the fellowship of our church.”

Earlier this month, Conrad told other news outlets Towne View had been notified the Credentials Committee would be recommending to the Executive Committee that it be disfellowshipped.

Towne View made the decision to accept a male homosexual couple with their three adopted sons who sought membership there in October 2019, Conrad has said, and at the time lost 30 percent of its membership. But he remains committed to his decision.

“We see them, as all of us, as children of God created in the image of God,

and anyone who can profess Jesus as Lord should be welcomed into our church,” he said.

St. Matthews Baptist

The Kentucky Baptist Convention had disfellowshipped St. Matthews in 2018 over its support of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and its stance toward LGBT issues. The church had continued its affiliation with the SBC.

St. Matthews Pastor Greg Barr wasn’t available for comment today, but has previously described the decision by the KBC as “disheartening.”

“The Kentucky Baptist Convention had an opportunity to demonstrate to a divided nation that we do not have to agree on everything in order to love each other and partner together in carrying out the mission Jesus called us to. Unfortunately, the convention chose a different course,” Barr told the *Louisville Courier-Journal*. “Our church believes that unity and difference of opinion can co-exist in the service of our Lord.”

Antioch Baptist

Antioch Baptist employs as its pastor John Randy Leming Jr., who pleaded guilty to two counts of statutory rape for sex with a 16-year-old congregant when he pastored Shiloh Baptist Church in Sevier County. He pleaded guilty in 1998 to the offenses that occurred in May and June of 1994, when he was 31, and lost his appeal of the concurrent 18-month sentences he deemed harsh.

Leming has served at Antioch since March 2014, according to the SBC Annual Church Profile. He could not be reached for comment.

West Side Baptist

West Side Pastor David Pearson is listed on the National Sex Offender registry for his 1993 conviction of aggravated criminal sexual assault of a child in Denton. Contacted by Baptist Press regarding the Executive Committee's action, Pearson said he had no comment.

West Side Baptist Church previously was disfellowshipped by the Baptist Resource Network of Pennsylvania/South Jersey but continued to affiliate with the SBC.

The SBC is in the process of amending its constitution to specify sexual abuse as a grounds for a church to be disfellowshipped, but the move already is allowed because of other SBC measures regarding sexual abuse.

Messengers to the SBC annual meeting approved the constitutional amendment in 2019, but constitutional amendments require approval in two successive annual meetings for adoption. The 2020 SBC Annual Meeting was canceled due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Messengers are expected to vote on the amendment for a second time at the 2021 SBC Annual Meeting in June in Nashville.

The proposed amendment on sexual abuse would add a section to Article III of the SBC Constitution defining a "cooperating church" as one that "has not been determined by the Executive Committee to have evidenced indifference in addressing sexual abuse that targets minors and other vulnerable persons and in caring for persons who have suffered because of sexual abuse."