

Lawsuit against McLean Bible and David Platt dismissed

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—A yearlong legal battle over a contested election at a prominent Washington, D.C.-area church appears to be over for now.

On June 24, a judge in Fairfax County, Va., dismissed a lawsuit filed by dissident members of McLean Bible Church who sought to overturn the results of an election for church leaders, known as elders.

Those members argued that church leaders, including Senior Pastor David Platt, a best-selling author and former president of the Southern Baptist Convention's International Mission Board, had violated the church's constitution.

The suit was dismissed with prejudice, meaning the plaintiff cannot refile the same claim again in that court.

"I know that many churches across America have faced and are facing similar challenges during these days, and it is vitally important that we move past division and live out John 13:35, demonstrating love for one another and love for a world in need of Jesus," Platt said in a statement June 27.

Rick Boyer, attorney for the plaintiffs in the lawsuit, said his clients plan to appeal.

Unrest in the congregation

The dispute at McLean centered around a failed June 30, 2021, election. The church's constitution requires that new elders receive 75 percent

approval—and for the first time in McLean’s history, a new group of elders failed to reach that margin

The election came amid [simmering unrest at the church](#), where political polarization in the wider culture seeped into the congregation—the larger “woke war” in the evangelical world.

A group of critics that runs a Facebook group called “Save McLean Bible Church” claimed church leaders had substituted critical race theory and social justice for biblical teaching. Rumors had begun to circulate around the church that Platt and other leaders planned to sell a church building to a local Muslim congregation for a mosque.

COVID-19 also played a role. Some church members who had been attending online, rather than in person, claimed their ballots had been disqualified.

Following the first failed election, a second election was held in early July 2021, this one where members had to sign their ballots—which critics said violated the church practice of using secret ballots. In that election, the elders were approved, which led dissident members to file a suit.

This past spring, hoping to resolve the dispute, McLean leaders decided to discard the results of the July 2021 elder election. They organized a [new election](#) for elders in mid-June 2022, using secret ballots. All active members were allowed to vote.

The plaintiffs in the lawsuit objected, saying anyone who joined the church after the June 2021 election should not be allowed to vote.

All six elders on the ballot received at least 86 percent approval.

Wade Burnett, a pastor on McLean’s leadership team, said the congregation decided to move forward together in a difficult time. He told

Religion News Service the church believes it will prevail if there is an appeal.

“Every time this lawsuit has been filed or amended or refiled, it has resulted in a dismissal,” he said. “We believe the same thing would happen on appeal in this matter, as our church has now voted and re-voted in ways that are crystal clear. We want to move forward in unity, and we do not believe any appellate court would restrict us from doing that.”