

SBC Executive Committee resolves impasse; sexual abuse investigation to begin

NASHVILLE (BP and local reports) – Members of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) Executive Committee agreed Oct. 5 to waive attorney-client privilege on a “selective” basis for the upcoming independent investigation of the Committee and its staffers concerning the handling of sexual abuse claims.

The Sexual Abuse Task Force, assembled by SBC President Ed Litton, lead pastor of Redemption Church in Saraland, Ala., was mandated by messengers to the 2021 SBC Annual Meeting in June and will oversee the investigation. Guidepost Solutions, headquartered in New York City, was chosen earlier to conduct the inquiry.

Trustees met for more than three and a half hours via Zoom before the group voted in favor of a motion to waive privilege by a margin of 44-31. Three members abstained from the vote. It was the third meeting after two previous special called meetings failed to reach an agreement on the privilege issue.

Six members of the Executive Committee resigned between the first special called meeting and the third special called meeting Oct. 3. Some Committee members were concerned that waiving the privilege could lead to liability and insurance problems.

The motion as approved calls for a “selective” waiving of attorney client privilege “that includes an investigation into any allegations of abuse, mishandling of abuse, mistreatment of victims, a pattern of intimidation of victims or advocates, and resistance to sexual abuse reform initiatives of the actions and decisions of staff and members of the Executive Committee from January 1, 2000, to June 14, 2021.”

Committee member Adam Wyatt, pastor of Corinth Church, Magee, voted to waive the privilege. He said after the vote, "While it has been a long and arduous process, ultimately I believe that the messengers' call to transparency and accountability [was] heard.

"I am grateful for Chairman Rolland Slade's stable and godly leadership during this process. In spite of every attempt at division, stonewalling, and legal-speak, Rolland held the course for us.

"I think it is important to make clear that it was the trustees who led us to adopt the final motion in spite of the maneuvering and lack of leadership by some EC staff members.

"It was a tough decision, but, in the end, it was imperative that we join the messengers in fighting for an open and transparent investigation. Survivors deserve it and the messengers demanded it. Now, we must ensure it gets done," Wyatt said.

Jared Wellman, lead pastor of Tate Springs Church in Arlington, Texas, who offered the motion approved in the Oct. 5 meeting, said, "I'm encouraged by today's vote that honors the will of the messengers who spoke clearly in Nashville and in recent days about their desire for a transparent investigation," said

Litton, who previously said he was "grieved" over the Committee's reluctance to waive the privilege, reported after the Oct. 5 meeting, "I am grateful, especially after many difficult weeks of discussion, that the full, transparent, and unimpeded investigation will now commence. Even so, it is critical to remember that today's vote marks not the end, but the beginning of this process."

The "selective" waiving of privilege means documents to be viewed and interviews must fit in a limited window that includes:

- Allegations of abuse by Executive Committee members.
- Mishandling of abuse allegations by Executive Committee members between Jan. 1, 2000, to June 14, 2021.
- Allegations of mistreatment of sexual abuse victims by Executive Committee members from Jan. 1, 2000, to June 14, 2021.
- Patterns of intimidation of sexual abuse victims or advocates from Jan. 1, 2000, to June 14, 2021.
- Resistance to sexual abuse reform initiatives from Jan. 1, 2000, to June 14, 2021.

The motion also gave Committee Chairman Rolland Slade, pastor of Meridian Church in El Cajon, Ca., authority to execute the contract between the Committee, the Sexual Abuse Task Force, and Guidepost Solutions.

The contract calls for the creation of a Committee of Cooperation of the Executive Committee, which will be composed of four Committee members and led by Litton. Two of the members will be chosen by the Sexual Abuse Task Force, and two members will be chosen by the Executive Committee.

According to the contract, the Committee of Cooperation is charged with:

- Financial oversight of the independent investigation in addition to the financial oversight exercised by the Task Force.
- Electing, in cooperation with the Task Force, a liaison between the Executive Committee and Guidepost Solutions to ensure smooth flow of information and response to information requests.
- Receipt of periodic monthly updates noting document, witness, and information requests made to the Executive Committee, to ensure information sought is consistent with and responded to in cooperation with the motion passed by messengers.
- Ensuring that the Executive Committee and SBC are fully cooperative in this matter.

Guidepost will begin its investigative work immediately and is required to present a public report 30 days before the 2022 SBC Annual Meeting in June in Anaheim, Ca.

Near the end of the meeting Slade spoke pastorally to the group, reflecting on the process since messengers approved the original motion on June 15. "I'd like to really express my relief that this present challenge seems to be behind us," he said.

"Also, I want to express sorrow over the conduct that we have displayed as Southern Baptists over the course [of what] was absolutely a necessary deliberative process."

Slade, who said apologies should be made, called on Southern Baptists to stop attacking one another and "move down this road together."

"Most importantly, it's time to know for sure where we have fallen short on the question of sexual abuse within the Southern Baptist convention, so that we can correct any errors and move into the future as a convention, that's the most safe for our most vulnerable members," he stressed.

Nearly 100 Mississippi Baptist leaders signed an Oct. 1 open letter to the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) Executive Committee urging members to resolve disagreements that were stalling of the independent investigation. For the unabridged letter and list of signatories, [click here](#).