

ERLC announcement reversed; Leatherwood remains; trustee chair out

By Jennifer Davis Rash

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Within hours of releasing a statement on Monday evening (July 22) saying Brent Leatherwood had been “removed” from his position as president of the Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission, the organization announced the following morning that Leatherwood remains in the position. Meanwhile, the chair of the ERLC’s Executive Committee, Kevin Smith, has resigned and since posted an apology on social media.

The details of what triggered the initial decision to remove Leatherwood as president remains unclear, but the ERLC board of trustees held a special-called informational meeting via Zoom July 23 and released a clarification statement.

‘Absolutely bewildered’

In a statement on X, Leatherwood noted, “I deeply appreciate everyone who has reached out, especially our trustees who were absolutely bewildered at what took place yesterday and jumped in to set the record straight.”

On Monday, an email from ERLC showed up in media inboxes a little after 6:30 p.m. Central time with the following statement: “In accordance with our bylaws, the executive committee has removed Brent Leatherwood as president. Further details, as well as plans for the transition, will be provided at our September board meeting. Until then, the executive committee of the board of trustees will assume directional responsibility for carrying out the ministry assignments for the ERLC.”

No other information was provided, but the decision comes on the heels of a large social media backlash the day before when Leatherwood responded to President Joe Biden's announcement with this social media post: "Not only is this a historic decision, it is the right decision for our nation. ... Despite what some partisans will say, to walk away from power is a selfless act – the kind that has become all too rare in our culture."

ERLC trustee Joe Godfrey from Alabama said that while he is not part of ERLC's executive committee and was not part of the decision to terminate Leatherwood's position, he did write "to tell Mr. Leatherwood that I had heard from a number of pastors and church leaders who felt his comments were not appropriate and seemed partisan."

The week prior, Leatherwood released a statement in response to the assassination attempt on former President Donald Trump. It read in part:

"In a democracy like ours, we voice our opinions, we passionately press our case, we bravely dissent, and we loudly campaign for our cause. But we must never cross the line to harm those we disagree with. Political violence has hurt too many individuals and taken too many lives in our history. Now is the moment for all of us to unite and bring a swift and universal condemnation to this vile act that has no place whatsoever in America.

"While it will be easy to use this moment as an opportunity to dig in our heels, I urge Americans to pause, lament this violence, and realize how far we have strayed from our nation's ideals. Let's commit to praying for our leaders, those who are willing to serve in public office, and appeal to our Lord that His reconciling work would be poured out on this nation to overcome the hatred that is so prevalent in our culture."

Vote to abolish ERLC

This is not the first time, Leatherwood and the ERLC have been under fire for past decisions.

Leatherwood, like his predecessor Russell Moore, has been the topic of concern among some Baptists, while messengers to the SBC Annual Meeting this past summer in Indianapolis voted down an attempt to abolish ERLC as an entity. See related story [here](#).

For now, questions still remain on the what sparked the decision to remove Leatherwood from his position.

Smith, pastor of Family Church Village in West Palm Beach, Florida, previously served as executive director of the Baptist Convention of Maryland/Delaware and has been on the ERLC board since 2018.

He apologized in the hours following the initial announcement in a since-deleted social media post for a “consequential procedural mistake,” The Tennessean reported. “The mistake was mine; I apologize.”

While The Baptist Paper typically does not cover trustee meetings of the Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission, a coverage team likely will be present at the upcoming Sept. 10–11 meeting in Nashville, Tennessee, to learn more about this recent development.