

Lifeway legal action against former president/CEO Rainer has not been withdrawn, despite trustee board chairman's statement last week



Rainer

NASHVILLE (BP and local reports) –An attorney for Lifeway Christian Resources of the Southern Baptist Convention has let it be known that the Nashville-based organization will not officially withdraw its legal action against former president and chief executive officer Thom Rainer, even though the trustee board chairman appeared to indicate last week that the legal action was being dropped.

Lifeway's attorney notified Rainer on Oct. 2 that the breach of contract lawsuit will not be dropped despite a statement released on Sept. 30 by trustee chairman Todd Fannin that, "in lieu of moving forward with litigation, both parties are currently exploring the possibility of an agreed upon resolution of the differences."



Fannin

Fannin, owner of Tack Designs in Pryor, Okla., and a member of Life Fellowship Church in Pryor, followed up his Sept. 30 statement by saying over the past weekend: “To further clarify, in a good faith gesture the trustee executive committee agreed to pause any further legal action to allow LifeWay and Dr. Rainer to work on an agreed upon resolution. We are waiting on Dr. Rainer to respond to our suggested resolutions of the issues that were provided to his counsel on Tuesday. Our continued prayer is that this will be resolved quickly and amicably.”

The executive committee of the trustee board authorized the lawsuit Sept. 28 in Williamson County (Tenn.) chancery court, alleging Rainer had violated his separation agreement with LifeWay by publishing with a competitor. The agreement between Rainer and LifeWay upon his 2019 retirement precluded him from having any business association with LifeWay competitors until Oct. 31, 2021. The agreement specifically listed Tyndale House Publishers as a LifeWay competitor. In August 2020, Tyndale announced a multi-book publishing partnership with Rainer that includes video curriculum.

For his part, Rainer seems to have a different understanding of the situation. He said LifeWay’s communication with his attorney gave a “clear impression” the suit would be dropped. Rainer contends his attorney requested confirmation Oct. 1 that the lawsuit had been withdrawn, and received a letter from LifeWay’s attorney Oct. 2 stating: “Mr. Rainer’s request for LifeWay to withdraw the lawsuit was shared with

the board officers yesterday, and they decided to respectfully decline the request.”

Rainer told Baptist Press that a letter from LifeWay dated Oct. 1, 2019, granted him “rights reversal” on his writings, and LifeWay officials communicated in subsequent verbal comments that he was released to publish books with any publishing house he selected. Previously, Rainer said he had received “a written and amicable release from publishing” with LifeWay, he had discussed the matter with LifeWay’s attorney, and he had “assumed all was well” until receiving notice of the lawsuit.



Scroggins

LifeWay’s mixed messages about the lawsuit have been met with concern among trustees, who say the full board was not advised of the lawsuit until the day it was filed, and some Southern Baptist pastors are beginning to speak out. Immediate past trustee chairman Jimmy Scroggins, lead pastor at Family Church in West Palm Brach, Fla., who still serves on the board, requested an official withdrawal of the lawsuit following Fannin’s Sept. 30 statement.

Scroggins said his concerns were “not personal” and that the full board should be permitted to vote on whether the suit proceeds. “If the legal action is still actually filed with the court, then I believe our public announcements and announcements to the board are misleading,” Scroggins wrote in an internal board communication confirmed by Baptist Press. “I think we should formally retract our legal action.”



Bonts

Chris Bonts, senior pastor of First Church, Middleburg, Fla., and a former Rainer research assistant at Southern Seminary in Louisville, Ky., said the church he pastors will stop doing business with LifeWay until the legal action is dropped. “As of today, FBC Middleburg has postponed all purchases from @LifeWay until they drop the lawsuit against @ThomRainer,” Bonts tweeted. First Church, Middleburg, a Jacksonville-area congregation, averages approximately 800 in worship.

Barry Fields, pastor of Glendale at Cave Mill Church in Bowling Green, Ky., tweeted that Rainer “is owed a public apology.” He told Baptist Press that Rainer has “more credibility among typical SBC pastors and churches” than LifeWay’s trustee leadership. “From my perspective, and I think a lot of other pastors’ perspective[s], regardless of whether or not the lawsuit has merit – and it may very well have merit – it seems obvious that every effort has not been made to handle this before going public.”



Fields

An emergency LifeWay trustee meeting originally slated for Sept. 30 was postponed by the 13-member executive committee of the trustee board. In a Sept. 30 e-mail to

trustees, Fannin promised additional information within a week. No date for the rescheduling of the postponed Sept. 30 trustee meeting has been announced.