

Report finds ERLC ‘a source of significant distraction from the Great Commission work of Southern Baptists’

NASHVILLE (BP and local reports) – A special task force commissioned by the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) Executive Committee to study the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission (ERLC) has concluded “the current perception of the leadership and direction of the ERLC by many Southern Baptists is a substantial impediment to the growth of the Cooperative Program,” with “potential for a measurable decline in the near future and beyond” if there are not “quick and significant changes in that perception.”

The report, released Feb. 1, does acknowledge support within the SBC for the ERLC, but added that some see ERLC as “a source of significant distraction from the Great Commission work of Southern Baptists.”



Moore

The ERLC has at times been a flashpoint of controversy during the tenure of President Russell Moore, a Biloxi native, for reasons including Moore’s outspoken opposition to Donald Trump’s candidacy during the 2016 presidential election and Trump’s subsequent presidency.

More recently, the ERLC came under fire for submitting an

error-filled amicus brief in a federal lawsuit that wrongly described the SBC as a hierarchy. In its report, the task force called the brief, as well as ERLC's response and subsequent handling of the brief, "unacceptable."

The task force also said its findings showed "considerable conversation" continues in the SBC "as to the effectiveness and efficiency of the ERLC's current structure in addressing public policy concerns."



Stone

"The task force sought to find objective verifiable facts," said Mike Stone, chairman of the task force, immediate past SBC Executive Committee chairman, and pastor of Emmanuel Church in Blackshear, Ga. "Based on the statistical information we received, the direction of the ERLC is a significant source of division and creates a very real challenge to reversing CP decline."

Stone, who will be nominated for SBC president at the convention's 2021 annual meeting in June in Nashville, said the report "is not based on anecdotes or third-hand reports. It is based, almost exclusively, on documented facts received from the chief executive officers of various state conventions."

State Baptist convention executives who responded to a questionnaire said they regularly heard a variety of concerns from pastors, including:

- Moore's opposition to Trump.

- Complaints that ERLC is not responsive and that its leadership has been “disrespectful and condescending” to questions from Southern Baptists.
- Frustration over an amicus brief filed in support of the building of a mosque in New Jersey in 2016.
- Disappointment over perceived inaction on religious liberty issues during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Disagreement with the ERLC’s official stance on immigration.

The task force report added that several state conventions reported “little to no negative effect of the ERLC on their state convention ministries.”

The task force report noted reaction in January from “multiple churches” in “some of our largest state conventions” to comments by Moore “related to the unlawful incident at the United States Capitol on Jan. 6.”

Those churches weren’t concerned by “Moore’s condemnation of the U.S. president or by the renunciation” of the incursion at the Capitol, the task force report stated. “Rather, the churches were troubled by Dr. Moore’s comments in light of the silence of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission” related to “violent and destructive protests” in the nation during summer 2020.

The task force offered six recommendations, including asking the full Executive Committee to request that the ERLC board of trustees “encourage the president and staff to refrain from opposing specific candidates for public office.” Among the task force’s other recommendations:

- Provide greater clarity on SBC-wide giving trends.
- Request the ERLC’s trustee board encourage staff “to focus, where possible, on speaking where the SBC has already spoken through resolutions and the Baptist Faith and Message.”

- Request the ERLC’s trustee board encourage staff to be more responsive to Southern Baptists’ questions about “certain news items.”
- Request the ERLC’s trustee board to help its staff “develop an intentional plan to demonstrate a greater appreciation for how its positions, including social media usage, affect the spirit of cooperation among Southern Baptists.”
- Request that the trustee boards of SBC entities institute a policy of submitting legal briefs on topics related to Southern Baptist polity for review by the SBC’s attorneys before being filed.

ERLC’s trustee officers, in a Feb. 2020 open letter, called formation of the task force “unwarranted, divisive, and disrespectful.”

“We find the action of the Executive Committee... disappointing, unnecessary, and harmful to our cooperative work in the SBC,” the ERLC trustee officers wrote, adding: “At a time where a unified voice is needed for our cooperative Gospel work, the Executive Committee is sowing needless division, treating trustees with disrespect, and spreading suspicion with this unnecessary task force.”



Prince

David Prince, ERLC trustee chairman and pastor of preaching and vision at Ashland

Avenue Church in Lexington, Ky., issued a statement after the task force report was released that read: "I think Southern Baptists can see this report for exactly what it is and are ready to move on from this moment and focus on our mission together."

"The ERLC has served Southern Baptists faithfully during a time of political, cultural, and in some cases, denominational chaos. Much of this chaos remains with us, including widespread news of many of our black and brown brothers and sisters leaving the SBC. That should be alarming to all of us."

"Regardless, all this and more is why I am grateful the ERLC serves our churches with a vibrant and bold Gospel witness day in and day out."

Prince also serves as an assistant professor of Christian preaching at Southern Seminary in Louisville.

The task force findings will be considered during the regularly-scheduled

meeting of the full Executive Committee on Feb. 22-23 in Nashville. Along with Stone, SBC Executive Committee members who served on the task force were:

- Ron Hale, retired pastor living in Jackson, Tenn.
- Mike Lawson, senior pastor of First Church, Sherman, Texas.
- Cheryl Samples, retired layperson from Dallas, Ga.
- Hoyt Savage, lead pastor of Foothills Church, Las Vegas, Nev.
- Monte Shinkle, senior pastor of Concord Church, Jefferson City, Mo.
- Rolland Slade, senior pastor, Meridian Church, El Cajon, Calif. Slade was elected the first African-American chairman of the SBC Executive Committee in June 2020.

The full task force report can be accessed at <https://3c9inr29cnbxopwsm4bdy491-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Final-Report-of-the-ERLC-Study-Task-Force.pdf>.

Report appendices may be accessed at <https://3c9inr29cnbxopwsm4bdy491-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Final-Appendices-ERLC-Study-Task-Force.pdf>.