

SBC Executive Committee 'disfellowships' West Texas church

February 19, 2020

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (BP)—The Southern Baptist Convention's Executive Committee voted to "disfellowship" a Midland church whose pastor is a registered sex offender.

Controversy surrounding the 2020 Pastors' Conference program and questions regarding the work of the Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission also drew action from the SBC Executive Committee at its Feb. 17-18 meeting in Nashville.

As recommended by the SBC Credentials Committee, the Executive Committee voted to disfellowship Ranchland Heights Baptist Church in Midland, whose senior pastor Phillip Rutledge is a registered sex offender.

Neither the [Baptist General Convention of Texas](#) nor the [Southern Baptists of Texas Convention](#) identify Ranchland Heights Baptist Church on their websites as an affiliated congregation.

Rutledge, who became pastor of the church in June 2016, was convicted in 2003 of aggravated sexual assault against two girls, ages 11 and 12, respectively.



Stacy Bramlett, chair of the SBC Credentials Committee, addressed SBC Executive Committee members before the group voted to disfellowship Ranchland Heights Baptist Church in Midland, because of its employment of a lifetime registered sex offender as pastor. (Photo by Eric Brown)

In February 2019, a comprehensive [investigative report](#) by the *Houston Chronicle* and the *San Antonio Express-News* revealed about 380 ministers and volunteers in SBC churches sexually abused more than 700 people. The *Chronicle* created an “Abuse of Faith” [database](#) of convicted sex offenders in churches, and Rutledge appears on it.

The Midland church is the first disfellowshipped since messengers to the 2019 SBC annual meeting revised the function of the Credentials Committee. The committee now is authorized to receive reports of a church’s suspected departure from Southern Baptist polity, doctrine or practice and to make recommendations to the SBC Executive Committee

regarding the possible disfellowship of churches from the SBC.

Ranchland Heights last reported 75 members and an average church attendance of 60 in 2017, but reported no Cooperative Program giving to the SBC.

Controversy surrounds SBC Pastors' Conference

The SBC Executive Committee voted to allocate meeting space for the 2020 SBC Pastors' Conference provided President David Uth amends the program by Feb. 24.

The recommendation, which originated in the Executive Committee's Business and Finance Committee, did not note specific program changes needed, but the speaker lineup has generated controversy among some Southern Baptists.

Some raised concerns about a woman on the program, Hosanna Wong, who is both a "spoken word artist" and a teaching pastor at her church, which is not affiliated with the SBC. Others criticized scheduled speaker David Hughes, senior pastor of Church by the Glades in Coral Springs, Fla., who has based sermon series on themes some considered sexually provocative.

First Baptist Church of Orlando, where Uth is pastor, pledged Feb. 17 to cover the full cost of the 2020 Pastors' Conference. However, the Executive Committee voted to continue the arrangement where the conference reimburses the SBC Executive Committee a portion of the cost.

SBC Executive Committee Chair Mike Stone said his desire is for changes to be made to the program, "so we can proceed in keeping with who we are as Southern Baptists."

Is the ERLC hurting the CP?

Upon the recommendation of the Cooperative Program Committee, the Executive Committee also voted to create a study task force to examine the Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission. (See related article [here](#).)

The task force will “review the past and present activities of the Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission in the fulfillment of its convention-approved ministry assignments and ... assess whether the actions of the commission and its leadership are affecting Cooperative Program giving or the further advancement of the Cooperative Program.”

The study group is charged with fact-finding, Stone said, and was not formed with the intention of recommending ERLC personnel changes.

The task force was instructed to submit its findings at or before the Executive Committee’s September 2020 meeting.

Endorsed Vision 2015, heard reports

The Executive Committee endorsed and voted to forward to messengers at the 2020 SBC annual meeting Vision 2025, an evangelism, missions and stewardship initiative initiated by SBC Executive Committee President Ronnie Floyd and supported by various SBC entity leaders.

Under Vision 2025, Southern Baptists would work to add 500 fulltime International Mission Board missionaries by 2025, add 6,000 new Southern Baptist churches, encourage those called to ministry to engage in their calling; reverse a decline in baptism and discipleship among 12- to 17-year-olds, and surpass \$500 million in Cooperative Program giving.

In reports to the Executive Committee, North American Mission Board president Kevin Ezell and International Mission Board president Paul

Chitwood announced the combining of national and international compassionate causes through Send Relief, currently a ministry of NAMB.

“Both entities working together will make it easier for Southern Baptists to get involved in meeting needs so that lives can be changed through the power of the Gospel,” Ezell said.

“I’m excited about how this will multiply Southern Baptist compassion ministry efforts and build a simple on-ramp for pastors and churches who want to be involved in the great work Southern Baptists are doing in North America and around the world.”

Add prayer assignment, day to SBC calendar

Also, the Executive Committee voted unanimously to forward to messengers amendments to the committee’s mission and ministry statements as Floyd requested, updating the language and adding a seventh ministry assignment on prayer.

As approved, the Executive Committee would “assist churches through elevating the ministry of prayer,” with an express goal of providing “strategic leadership to lift up and promote coordinated prayer for spiritual awakening, ministry effectiveness, and the completion of the Great Commission.”

The Executive Committee also voted to recommend to messengers to the SBC annual meeting the addition of a George Liele Church Planting, Evangelism and Missions Day to the SBC Calendar. It would be observed annually on the first Sunday in February beginning in 2021, approving a request initiated in 2019 by the SBC National African American Fellowship honoring Liele as the first Baptist missionary abroad.

NAAF President Marshal Ausberry, who also is SBC first vice president, affirmed the move in comments to BP.

“If I use a basketball term, he was a triple threat, an evangelist, a missionary, and church planter. All done under extremely difficult circumstances,” Ausberry said. “If George Liele had a basketball jersey I think we would all be wearing it. He rightfully stands along with the missionary giants (Adoniram) Judson and (William) Carey.”

Robert Anderson, who made the motion at the 2019 SBC Annual Meeting in Birmingham to add the calendar date, also affirmed the Executive Committee vote.

“The Bible tells us to give honor to whom honor is due (Romans 12:7), and thus, recognizing the Rev. George Liele, is very compelling historically because it corrects the popular notion that Adoniram Judson or William Carey were the first international missionaries from America,” Anderson said. “Rev. Liele preceded both of them to the foreign field to preach the Gospel, help the hurting, and start new churches.”

In other business, the Executive Committee:

- Approved a 2020-2021 SBC Cooperative Program Allocation Budget of \$196.7 million, including \$143,838,000 for world mission ministries; \$43,544,400 for theological education ministries; \$5,875,350 for SBC Executive Committee and SBC operations, and \$3,242,250 for ERLC. The budget includes a new allocation of \$200,000 for Vision 2025.
- Recommended amending the SBC Bylaws and Constitution regarding the process of elections and timing of business at the annual meeting, and

- Recognized Roger S. “Sing” Oldham, retired Executive Committee vice president for communications and convention relations, and Ken Weathersby, retired Executive Committee vice president for convention advancement.

With additional reporting by Managing Editor Ken Camp