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September 3, 2020

Dr. David E. Prince, Chairman  
Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission  
of the Southern Baptist Convention  
601 Applegate Dr.  
Nicholasville, KY 40356

Reference: ERLC Trustee meeting and performance

Dear Chairman Prince and fellow ERLC Trustees:

I'm writing you a few weeks before this year's "virtual" Trustee meeting. I will miss seeing you in person, my annual shoeshine from Percy in the downtown Arcade, and paying late-night respects to Prince's Hot Chicken. And I will miss hearing in person about the wonderful things accomplished by the ERLC in the past year.

However, I do not want another year to go by without sharing some concerns. I'm not sure an all-Trustee letter is the best forum. But after several years as a Trustee, I'm not aware of an alternative channel for communicating concerns to our group apart from the meeting itself. There does not seem to be a formally-designated place where Trustee concerns are elicited. Please excuse me for taking the liberty of inventing my own method.

I have three areas of concern. We have lost several key staff. SBC leaders seem to see the ERLC as detached or estranged from the SBC family. And the ERLC seems to be struggling to find a clear vision for representing the entire Baptist family. All of these point to a demoralized, isolated ERLC.

I write to ask you to help me double-check these concerns. The Convention asks us to be its eyes and ears *together*. Before we meet virtually to talk about the ERLC's performance, I prayerfully suggest each Trustee *talk to knowledgeable Baptists in his or her state, and ask for a frank assessment of the ERLC's work*. I believe the ERLC will benefit from Trustees gathering this candid information from our constituents.

## CONCERN 1: IS THE STAFF DEMORALIZED?

Since our last meeting, we have lost at least three, key ERLC staff members: Philip Bethancourt, Dan Darling, and Andrew Walker. All three have expressed a sense of calling to new positions; I am glad for their new ministries.

But long experience teaches that groups of leaders do not depart well-functioning teams. These gifted, driven, young men decided within a few months of each other that working elsewhere would bring them more fulfillment.

Some organizations choose high turnover. They expect CEOs and staff to climb to higher rungs on the ladder. I hope we aim to be the high rung on the ladder for our key talent. Even if we cannot pay like some organizations, we provide a unique place to advance the Baptist vision of human flourishing.

When three, exemplary leaders leave in rapid succession, then, I think the whole Board should put real effort into understanding why. As a Board, we should know whether our plan for people is aligned with our goals.

Is there something about the 2020 ERLC that makes it more difficult to hire, grow, and maintain uniquely talented individuals? Do we have a strategy that attracts and retains talent? Are other staff looking to exit? How would we know?

Given the present situation, I think exit interviews and staff surveys should be a minimum for due diligence. All the Trustees should have the opportunity to give input on the questions to be asked, and all Trustees should receive the detailed responses for discussion. We may decide that a third-party would get better responses. I know of one major ministry that profitably used Fired-Up! Culture to conduct anonymous staff surveys to monitor morale and leadership impact. I would welcome your thoughts about how to address this issue at our meeting.

## CONCERN 2: DO SOME SBC LEADERS BELIEVE DR. MOORE AND/OR THE ERLC ARE PERILOUSLY ISOLATED AND CUT OFF?

For several years now, we have seen reports that the ERLC and its leaders are cut off from other SBC entities. I have been told by former Executive Committee employees that there was unusually little communication

between Dr. Moore and Dr. Frank Page. In the Spring, I reached out to one of Missouri's Executive Committee members, who told me many members of the Executive Committee are frustrated with the lack of communication between Dr. Moore and Dr. Floyd and the Executive Committee.

In July, outgoing SBC Executive Committee Chairman Mike Stone issued a statement about its ERLC Task Force:

**The ERLC Task Force was initiated on the top floor of the Baptist Building.** I agreed with it 100% but the motion that eventually created the Task Force was written in Nashville, Tennessee, not Blackshear, Georgia. **It was prepared and offered by the senior-most staff, unanimously approved by the officers, unanimously approved by a subcommittee of about 25 people, unanimously added to the plenary agenda,** then unanimously moved into executive session (not my request) where it was overwhelmingly approved. That's a lot of unanimous for a singlehanded action.

**Immediately prior to our February meeting, convention leaders from across the SBC requested Dr. Floyd to have the EC act in this very important matter.** I wish these men would be more public about their concerns but I also understand their unique positions. Still, comments from such trusted leaders cannot be ignored."

Dr. Stone's claims are testable. Did Dr. Floyd initiate a task force? Do dozens of Baptist leaders in our cooperating conventions believe we are estranged? Did other SBC leaders ask Dr. Floyd to act?

We can know. We should know.

If it's the truth, the ERLC is in a precarious position. The ERLC is a Cooperative Program ministry partner. We cannot accomplish our goals without cooperating with the other SBC entities enthusiastically. The other entities can't do *their* jobs without the ERLC. The Convention has repeatedly reorganized to make sure the needed work gets done.

Yes, some of the public reasons given for the Task Force are perfunctory and contradictory. I am still concerned about the width of the concerns. If multiple SBC constituencies are frustrated by the ERLC's absence or

distance, it should be an all-hands-on-deck moment for us, the Trustees. If the ERLC does not cooperate well with these essential partners, I am concerned about its long-term viability.

We should always protect Dr. Moore's ability to stand up for Biblical truth regardless of party politics. But courage and standing are not aided through self-isolation. The ERLC must have a plan for healthy relationships, no matter the past.

I don't much care to assign blame for who caused these relationships to founder. But isolation and distance are deadly to our mission. They must be overcome.

### CONCERN 3: DOES THE STAFF HAVE VISION AND ENTHUSIASM FOR REPRESENTING ALL SOUTHERN BAPTISTS?

My third concern is more diffuse. The ERLC seems withdrawn and struggling to find a footing in recent months. Obviously, great things have been done. In every year, the ERLC's staff does amazing things. We could fill our meeting just by listing off these worthwhile accomplishments.

But I cannot shake the feeling that the ERLC has withdrawn from some of the major political, ethical, and spiritual issues facing our churches. On the election, on impeachment, on Black Lives Matter, on riots, on civil disobedience, on government overreach, on women in ministry, and other topics, the ERLC has not taken a leading role in the SBC.

The ERLC hasn't been entirely silent on those issues, of course. And I'm not even calling to take definite stands on all of them; "lighting rod" is not a strategic position.

But the ERLC should be a reliable *leader* on those issues. It should discuss Baptist and non-Baptist voices, ideas, and points of view even on controversial topics. My personal observation is that we have been silent, and some Baptists are turning to other voices to fill the vacuum we have created.

Still, I can't put numbers to that observation, so it would almost be too vague to raise with all of you. Except for how it combines with what I've heard Dr. Moore raise about himself.

## IS LEADERSHIP STRUGGLING TO ARTICULATE AN INSPIRING FORWARD VISION?

In April, Dr. Moore gave a lengthy interview about his personality and management style. It appears on Ian Cron's TYPOLOGY podcast, which you can listen to.<sup>1</sup> Cron is an Episcopal priest, psychotherapist, and an expert on the Enneagram<sup>2</sup> personality theory.

The value of the interview is mostly in what Dr. Moore tells us about himself. Dr. Moore says that he sees himself as an "Enneagram Four" – "the Romantic" or "Individualist." Cron thinks many high-functioning leaders hold "Enneagram One" traits, as "perfectionists." Cron spends the bulk of the interview asking Dr. Moore about his work and management style, given this self-identity.

What does it mean for Dr. Moore to conclude he holds "Enneagram Four" traits?

At their best, says the Enneagram Institute, Fours are "profoundly creative... expressing the personal and the universal, possibly in a work of art ... able to transform all their experiences into something valuable."<sup>3</sup> Those are all positive attributes. I've heard many of us say similar things about Dr. Moore. At his best, he's profound, creative and prophetic. He has an unmatched gift for expounding on the universal truths using everyday experiences.

But Fours, says Rev. Cron, are motivated by "a sense that they carry ... some irredeemable deficiency – a missing piece in their essential makeup that they can't quite name ... usually early on with the struggling low self-esteem. I've never met a Four who told me that that was not an issue for them."

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.typologypodcast.com/podcast/2020/23/04/episode03-039/russellmoore>

<sup>2</sup> I don't object to Dr. Moore appearing on the podcast or talking about the Enneagram. My own view of the Enneagram is similar to my view of the Chinese Zodiac: as a placemat under my broccoli-beef, it might spark some table talk, but I wouldn't much advocate it outside the restaurant. And I certainly wouldn't base my church or business on its predictions. If it says anything, it says the most about your view of yourself.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.enneagraminstitute.com/type-4>

In unhealthy situations, Fours might “withdraw to protect their self-image and to buy time to sort out feelings.” As they “gradually think that they are different from others,” they might become “increasingly impractical, unproductive, or effete.” At their unhealthiest and least fulfilled, a stymied Four might be “depressed and alienated from self and others, blocked and emotionally paralyzed ... fatigued and unable to function.”

If Dr. Moore is hinting that this is even *loosely* a good description of his strengths and weaknesses, then we should be alert for these unhealthy patterns.

Is the overall trend of Dr. Moore and the ERLC toward increased connection, activity, and transformation in Baptist life? Or is it toward isolation, alienation, and unproductivity? How should we measure?

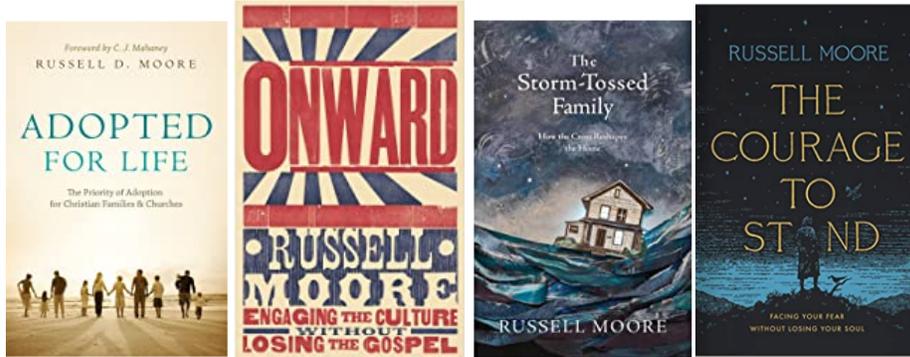
We might review videos of Dr. Moore at the 2016<sup>4</sup> and 2017 SBC; his answers to messenger questions were clear, candid, and almost combative. Compare those to his visible mood in 2018 and 2019, where he side-stepped questions about the Revoice conference and prior theological statements.

Or we might look at our libraries. The covers of past books like *ONWARD* and *Adopted for Life* reflect the feelings of the cheerful warriors they encouraged.

Last month, Dr. Moore announced a book-length treatment of Christian courage in the face of threatened exile, hurt, loneliness, loss of place in the tribe, and irrelevance. The cover is a lone individual, standing in near darkness. Dr. Moore argues the defining point in Elijah’s life was not victory on Mt. Carmel, but wandering in the wilderness. When Elijah was saying “I and I alone am left,” Dr. Moore says “[t]hat is where he really sees a revelation of God ... *I think the same is true for me.*”

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<sup>4</sup>[https://www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=130&v=BuGxOE0Vy1g&feature=emb\\_title](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=130&v=BuGxOE0Vy1g&feature=emb_title) (



I am, then, concerned by all these markers together. We are four years past 2016 and whatever recalibrations it made necessary. The cheerful warrior has not reappeared.

Instead, there are increasing signs that Dr. Moore feels estranged, distanced, or exiled from the Southern Baptists he must represent. Our engagement with “ERLC Fellows” has been unfocused and occasionally distracting. Our relationship with other entities is testy or nonexistent. Several members of our “dream team” have left, and the remaining group seems visibly demoralized and unsure how to speak into current Baptist life.

We have all seen the recent scandal of Liberty University’s Trustees. Russell Moore will never fail in the way Jerry Falwell, Jr., failed. But our Board, like Liberty’s, can love a leader to the death of his ministry. Too often, Baptist boards smile at success but confront problems only in hindsight. They can take earnest, committed, Christian leaders and praise them well past the point of ministry implosion. “The next generation” is no answer. Baptists have fed this machine several generations of young men with good character and firm theology, only to create old men of exhaustion and fear. We must act differently to make a difference.

Our organizational dashboard is full of blinking, red lights. We are responsible for the results of our internal processes. If we fail to confront processes that lead to isolation at the ERLC, it will damage our Convention and our entity. And it will damage our ministry leader and brother, Dr. Moore.

SUGGESTION: PLEASE TALK TO OTHER BAPTIST LEADERS IN YOUR STATE ABOUT THEIR PERCEPTION OF OUR STAFF'S PERFORMANCE, SO THAT THE BOARD HAS ADEQUATE INFORMATION TO EVALUATE AND GUIDE THE ERLC.

Southern Baptists have given us, as Trustees, the collective responsibility to judge and guide the ERLC.

I am happy to review and affirm a long list of individual projects completed every year. I am thankful we were polled this year about the staff's decision to accept PPP funds, and notified about our Executive Committee's responses to the SBC Executive Committee.

But after four years, I do not see us using systematic, measurable criteria or processes to propel the ERLC forward. The Board as a whole does not judge or provide input about the ERLC's performance from year to year. The Board is not asked to raise or consider problems, or asked to seek input from important constituents.

I don't think this is malicious. I think staff does not have a vision for using the systematic, relational judgment of a Board. For example, you may recall that last year I asked for the whole Board to be included in the annual salary and performance review process. As far as I can tell, there was no effort to ask us – as individuals or as representatives – for information about the ERLC's performance. It is impossible that a *few* of us know as much as *all* of us about the perception of the ERLC in our churches, associations, and conventions.

If cooperating Baptists asked us how we are doing, how should we know, other than gut feelings and officer summaries?

In successful organizations that I have been involved in, performance review covers measurable factors. It asks questions that only the Board can answer, with facts from inside and outside the organization. For example, Harvard Business Review says an evaluation might include five areas:

- **Leadership.** How well does the CEO motivate and energize the organization, and is the company's culture reinforcing its mission and values?

- **Strategy.** Is it working, is the company aligned behind it, and is it being effectively implemented?
- **People management.** Is the CEO putting the right people in the right jobs, and is there a stream of appropriate people for succession and to support growth goals?
- **Operating metrics.** Are sales, profits, productivity, asset utilization, quality, and customer satisfaction heading in the right direction?
- **Relationships with external constituencies.** How well does the CEO engage with the company's customers, suppliers, and other stakeholders?

How would you assess the ERLC's performance on these metrics? Do you feel you have the facts to judge fairly?

Would you join me in asking some key constituents to tell us about our performance? I am committed to:

- Ask my state's convention president, Executive Director, SBC Executive Committee Members, and some other involved Baptists how they would rate our performance in these five areas.
- Ask if I have their permission to share individual comments, if helpful to our efforts to improve the ERLC.
- Write a short summary about each area, especially if more than one person expresses similar positive or negative concerns.

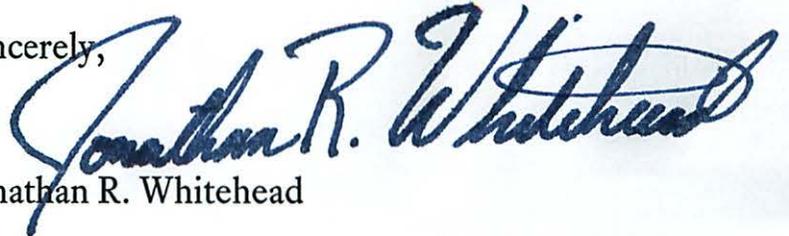
If you would like to receive my summaries, please let me know. If you write summaries of your own, I am happy to compile them in my office if you'll email them to me. And if those summaries merit further discussion, I am happy to arrange whatever electronic meeting that would help the Board do its job.

In asking, we will get some of the facts we need. Facts that our committees and staff do not currently have. Prayerfully, with the help of our executive committee, I hope we may start to overcome any sense that the ERLC is isolated. A reputation for denominational distance is an all-hands-on-deck issue for the ERLC.

Our large boards are not accidents or compromises. The Baptist system asks Trustees to do some things that staff and smaller groups simply cannot

accomplish, no matter how gifted they are. Our collective responsibility to watch and respond cannot be farmed out or delegated to others. I look forward to working with all of you as we do this important work together in the coming weeks and months.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Jonathan R. Whitehead". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping initial "J".

Jonathan R. Whitehead

cc:

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