

FOREWORD BY BRENT LEATHERWOOD



**THE ERLC
AND THE
COOPERATIVE
PROGRAM**

75 YEARS OF SOUTHERN BAPTIST
ADVOCACY IN THE PUBLIC SQUARE

ALEX WARD





THE ERLC AND THE COOPERATIVE PROGRAM

*75 Years of Southern Baptist
Advocacy in the Public Square*

ALEX WARD



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Foreword:

Advocating for Southern Baptists with Joy

In 2019, Dr. Paul Miller, a leading conservative intellectual and professor at Georgetown University, led a research initiative for the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission that examined how faith interacts with public policy and political preferences. The study came back with some surprising results that confirmed what many suspect about the state of the discourse in our nation right now. Those who were interviewed used telling words to describe our current public square: caustic, toxic, ignorant, and corrosive.

Of course, throughout history, the public square has always been a boisterous, noisy, and even dangerous place. In ancient Greece, the agora was an open, public space where politicians and merchants mingled with the citizenry. In mid-1800s Illinois, town squares around the state hosted what is arguably the greatest series of debates in American history: the Lincoln-Douglas debates. More recently, and tragically, Tiananmen Square in China is the spot where the Communist Chinese government snuffed out the public demonstrations for freedom so many of that country's citizens are still aching for today.

More broadly, the public square has come to be known as nearly any setting where ideas can be traded and debated. Obviously, in the 21st century, our public square not only encompasses marbled halls of decision-making but also the digital realm with websites, messaging applications, and social media platforms. With the advent of those technologies, effectively giving any individual a megaphone, it is understandable one would think our public square is being buffeted by some unique forces. While I am skeptical this is a new phenomena (after all, even in the times of yesteryear, any individual could grab a soapbox and make a speech or a spectacle), one thing is undoubtedly true: Navigating this chaotic environment is a challenge.

Whether we are discussing an individual or an organization, successfully engaging the public square requires several traits—fixed principles that are abided by and a consistent voice that engages the topics that matter. Why are these essential? Because they are necessary in order to cut through the noise and commotion.

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As I survey the last 75 years of the Cooperative Program-powered advocacy of this Commission, I would submit we have exhibited those traits all along the way. In fact, that has been the throughline of the work of this entity for that timeframe. It is a history that every Southern Baptist can not only appreciate but can take credit for. The accomplishments and work of this Commission represents a shared achievement for any member who has ever put forth an offering of any size at his or her SBC church.

I can say this with confidence because of the multitude of examples that are covered in these pages. Our Great Commission work, based on the unchanging principles of human dignity and religious freedom, spans generations. These principles spring forth from both the Scripture and the Baptist Faith and Message and serve as the anchor for our activities—and have now for 75 years.

You see it when you read through the instrumental and countercultural work of Dr. Foy Valentine who, as one obituary wrote of his efforts, was “tireless and courageous (in) helping Southern Baptists see racism as a spiritual issue.” One cannot help but notice it when you read through the valiant ways Dr. Richard Land led this Commission to be a foremost voice for the dignity of every preborn life (Psalm 139) and welcoming those seeking to enter this nation (Matthew 25) to pursue a better life. In more recent years, this same spirit has been evident in Dr. Russell Moore’s leadership in defense of God’s first institution of marriage (Genesis 2) and his willingness to call the convention to combat the scourge of sexual abuse.

Our Baptist principles have also underpinned less high-profile initiatives that have been advanced over the years. In my own time serving at this entity, the examples are too numerous to count. We have led discussions with the U.S. State Department about confronting the Chinese government for its heinous treatment of the Uyghur people; been cited by the majority in a consequential U.S. Supreme Court opinion that affirms the hiring authority unique to churches and religious organizations free from government interference; and are driving toward the placement of 50 life-saving ultrasound machines in America and beyond. In all of this activity, we eagerly anticipate that the Lord may be using any conversations we have as a pathway to sharing the gospel with whomever we are engaging.

Ultimately, this brief volume could never adequately present all the substantive work (including all that took place prior to this Commission becoming a CP-funded entity) that has been accomplished on behalf of Southern Baptists over the last 75 years. Perhaps, someday, some enterprising young scholar will make it the focus of his or her doctoral work.

The content of these pages should be viewed through the lens of gratitude; gratitude from this organization to our churches for allowing the present staff, and those who came before us, to be able to do this unique kingdom-advancing work. I choose the word gratitude purposefully because, underlying it, is joy (Romans 15:13). In the

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oft-times obnoxious public square we operate in, full of self-interested politicians, professional grifting organizations, hostile actors, and algorithms that promote outrage, our joy is truly a trait that sets us apart.

So, just as it has for the last 75 years, that spirit will continue to animate our work as ambassadors for Christ, being sent by a convention of churches that wants to implore the world to be reconciled to God (2 Corinthians 5). That is a message that will carry forth in any public square, no matter the clatter.

F. Brent Leatherwood

Explainer

A History of the ERLC

MAY 8 MARKS ONE anniversary of the founding of what would become the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission. The ERLC is the Southern Baptist entity tasked with speaking *for* Southern Baptists in the public square and speaking *to* Southern Baptists on matters of moral importance. Below are some highlights from the history of the ERLC and all its previous versions.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

The Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission is just the latest name in the history of this entity. Previously, it has been called the Christian Life Commission (1953-1997) and Social Service Commission (1947-1952). Also, depending on how you want to date the founding of the ERLC (information below), you could include a previous Social Service Commission (1913-1947) and a standing Committee on Temperance (1908-1913).

Each of these names has focused the organization at that particular time. The initial commissions were sporadic and worked on individual assignments rather than having a comprehensive agenda, focusing more on prohibition than other goals. As time progressed, the organization came to address more needs, prompting the change in the name. For example, the Committee on Temperance and Social Service had little to say about the 1918 flu epidemic, whereas the ERLC has written extensively about the 2020 coronavirus pandemic.

The name change from the Christian Life Commission to the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission represented the absorption of other committees in the mid-'90s and a commitment to defending the Baptist distinctive of the rights of conscience.

WHEN DID IT BEGIN?

As mentioned above, there is some debate about when the organization that would become the ERLC began. Southern Baptists have been organizing and weighing

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in on social issues since their founding. However, the formalization of an entity to address the moral and spiritual concerns of Southern Baptists in the public square represented a new attempt to work together for the goal of bringing the gospel to bear on social issues.

If you were to date the organization based on formalization and a line of discernible work, then the earliest date of the commission's founding would be 1908 with the creation of the Standing Committee on Temperance led by Arthur James Barton. This was the precursor to the Social Service Commission. In 1913, the Social Service Commission was founded. Barton would lead the group until 1942 (through various name changes) without pay.

However, if you were to date the commission based on when it first received official funding from the Southern Baptist Convention, then you would begin in 1942 under the leadership of Jesse Weatherspoon. A.J. Barton had occupied his position as head of the organization without pay for more than 30 years. In 1942, the SBC first formally apportioned money (\$1,000) from the convention for the commission. Previously, the Sunday School Board (the precursor to Lifeway) had helped to financially support the organization and work of Barton.

But it was not until 1947 (hence the current anniversary) that the leader of the organization was recognized with a title that was equivalent to an entity head and received Cooperative Program funding on a continual basis. Hugh Brimm was the first person to lead the organization when it was formally receiving funding from the SBC, and he was also given the title of "Secretary-Treasurer of the Social Services Commission." This position was a title equivalent to other entity heads and corresponds (loosely) with the current position of president for SBC entities.

Though the formal organization of the ERLC could be dated either by its initial work (1908), funding (1942), or a recognized title (1947), it is clear that there has been a concerted effort on the part of Southern Baptists to bring the gospel to bear on issues of moral importance in culture for over a century.

SIGNIFICANT AREAS OF WORK

The ERLC continues work in a long line of cultural engagement on a number of social issues. Although it is impossible to cover all of them, there are several that stand out as major themes in the work of the organization.

The first area of work is religious liberty, which was not an initial concern because it was the area of the other committees. However, with the absorption of the Public Affairs Committee, the organization took on the role of being the denomination's strongest advocate for religious liberty. This is reflected in the name of the organization, and its ongoing work at both the state and federal level. The ERLC has worked to protect this right because of its intrinsic connection to the Baptist tradition and the belief that each person has the right to worship as they please without fear of

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government interference. As early American Baptist John Leland often argued, because the government will not answer for a person's soul at judgment, it should not direct that soul in matters of religion. The ERLC continues the important work of protecting our first freedom.

Another area of work is that of human dignity. This term includes a holistic approach to questions of life, dignity, and worth. The ERLC has not always carried out the truths of the gospel perfectly in this area. Foy Valentine did not oppose the 1971 resolution on abortion which was supportive in some cases, and Barton was supportive of segregation practices. However, even in those areas there have been at least small hints that Southern Baptists were seeking to uphold the truth that each person was created in the image of God. Barton supported segregation, but he also supported theological education for African Americans, and urged the convention to support this work (even as he urged them to not integrate).

In contrast to Valentine, Richard Land and Russell Moore have been tireless advocates of the preborn. Both Land and Moore worked on issues of race and helped to pass the 1995 Resolution (Land) and organize the MLK50 event which brought together African American and white Christians to think on the legacy of Martin Luther King Jr. (Moore). The current staff of the ERLC stand in a long line of Southern Baptists who recognize the worth of every person and seek to uphold and proclaim their dignity as people of God.

The final area of importance is that of cultural engagement. The work of the ERLC (and its previous versions) has always been to engage on the issues of importance to Southern Baptists. This has included work on poverty, gambling, morality in public office, hunger, public policy, and popular culture. Southern Baptists have long recognized that Christians have a duty to speak into the culture with the truths of the gospel. This is not limited to one area. Rather, it encompasses every place where a Christian goes in their life. To quote the Dutch theologian Abraham Kuyper, "There is not a square inch in the whole of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry, 'Mine!'"

The ERLC recognizes the need for thoughtful engagement in every realm of society and seeks to provide Christians with resources for engaging the culture with the truths of the gospel.

Presidential Profiles

A Century of Serving Southern Baptists Through Advocacy

SIGNIFICANT LEADERS

Arthur James Barton (*served 1908–1942*): As the first leader of the organization that would eventually become the ERLC, Barton stands unparalleled for his work for the organization. He worked, without convention pay, for over three decades. Though initially commissioned to lead the Committee on Temperance, he would also lead the Social Service Commission to address a host of other issues. He was noted for his work in crafting the 18th Amendment, which prohibited the sale of alcohol, and remained committed to that cause until his death in 1942. It was not until after his death that the commission received funding (\$1,000 in 1943, and a percentage of Cooperative Program funds in 1947). This makes the work he and the standing committee accomplished all the more remarkable.

Jesse Weatherspoon (*served 1942–1947*): Weatherspoon served as the second Chairman of the Commission and was also the first to secure funding from the convention (\$1,000 in 1943). A professor of homiletics at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Weatherspoon was known for his advocacy on the issue of race relations. During his tenure (which overlapped with Brimm's role as executive director), Weatherspoon would help to lay a foundation for several later generations of work. He called for a Special Committee on Race Relations (1946), the first Social Service Commission conference on social concerns (1946), and the publication of a number of handbooks and tracts related to racial justice issues. At his urging, the Executive Committee reevaluated the role of the commission and eventually decided to fund the organization out of the Cooperative Program.

Hugh Brimm (*served 1947–1953*): Brimm served as the first Secretary-Treasurer of the Christian Life Commission after it received Cooperative Program funding.

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Though his tenure was brief, it included several major milestones. The organization's first issues of *Light* magazine were released during his tenure. The publication served as a bulletin updating the convention on issues of moral and spiritual significance. Key themes were those of militarism and race relations, as well as continued emphasis on labor relations and opposing the liquor trade. Continuing the work of Weatherspoon, who continued to serve at the organization, Brimm emphasized the importance of addressing the question of racial injustice in the South. In his final speech before the convention, he highlighted the growing threat of militarism and made reference to the need for Southern Baptists to integrate their schools.

Acker Miller (served 1953-1960): Just prior to Miller's tenure as Secretary-Treasurer, the SSC would be renamed the Christian Life Commission. His tenure would also mark the first time that the office of the commission was located in Nashville, Tennessee, rather than Louisville, Kentucky, under the tenures of Brimm and Weatherspoon. Miller, who had previously overseen the Texas Christian Life Commission, would make his first speech at the 1954 annual meeting in which he encouraged the convention to affirm the recent *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling. Miller's tenure, like those of his predecessors, would be marked by advocacy on the issue of racial justice and integration, a point which garnered significant resistance from some Southern Baptists.

Foy Valentine (served 1960-1987): Valentine represents an important figure in the life of the ERLC for several reasons. First, he supported efforts that today would fall under the umbrella of racial reconciliation. Valentine worked diligently to lead the convention to recognize the dignity of all peoples, especially African Americans. In his 1960 address, he encouraged the convention to help African Americans "to secure [equal rights] through peaceful and legal means and to thoughtfully oppose any customs which may tend to humiliate them in any way." Valentine's work, and many others as well, was crucial in setting a foundation for what would eventually be the Resolution On Racial Reconciliation On The 150th Anniversary Of The Southern Baptist Convention. Though Valentine was correct in his views on race, he also represented the drift left of the convention and was a member of the moderate wing which prompted the Conservative Resurgence in the 1970s and 80s within the Southern Baptist Convention.

Larry Baker (served 1987-1988): Baker, formerly a professor and dean at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, served the shortest tenure leading the Christian Life Commission. Chosen by moderates in the latter years of the Conservative Resurgence to replace Foy Valentine, Baker enjoyed little support from the sizable number of conservatives on his board, narrowly avoiding being dismissed from the position in

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his first year. Like Valentine, he was noted for his support of abortion. Recognizing that he was likely to be dismissed when the conservative trustees had a majority on the board, he resigned after only 19 months.

Richard Land (*served 1988-2013*): Richard Land was the first president elected to the Christian Life Commission after conservatives were able to appoint a leader. Land moved the commission back to its historic biblical roots and was a force for theological conservatism. Land helped to move the commission into new media avenues, including regular television appearances and a daily radio show, as well as the launch of its website. He, building on the work of Valentine, was essential in the crafting and passage of the 1995 Resolution on Racial Reconciliation. He also emphasized the role that the commission had for protecting religious liberty. Land also was the first person to serve as president of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission (the name was changed in 1997). Over the course of his service, he worked with the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, was an initial signatory of the Manhattan Declaration, and oversaw the start of the organization's Psalm 139 Project which places ultrasounds in pregnancy resource centers.

Russell Moore (*served 2013-2021*): Russell Moore's tenure at the ERLC was marked by a continuance of the themes from the Land administration, particularly around issues of racial justice, pro-life advocacy, and immigration reform. At the same time, it reckoned with new challenges facing the church such as the *Obergefell* decision which legalized same-sex marriage. Under the Moore administration, the ERLC hosted the first Evangelicals for Life Conference in conjunction with the annual March for Life in Washington, D.C., cohosted the MLK50 conference which commemorated the 50th anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination and urged evangelicals to grapple with racial injustice, and the launch of the Road to Roe50 event which aimed to place 50 ultrasound machines in pregnancy resource centers across the country. Further, his administration saw an expanded presence on Capitol Hill, and a further commitment to advance the rights of conscience around the world through advocacy against authoritarian regimes in North Korea and China on behalf of persecuted Christians and religious minorities.

Don't Count Baptists Out in the Matter of Equal Justice

The Christian Life Commission and Advocacy for Equal Justice

ON MAY 17, 1954, the Supreme Court released the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* decision which ruled that segregation in public schools was unconstitutional. Less than three weeks later, the Southern Baptist Convention held their annual meeting in St. Louis. Rising to the podium for his first report to the convention as the leader of the Christian Life Commission, Acker C. Miller offered his speech along with three recommendations. The first two—recommendations on juvenile delinquency and the advertising of liquor—were met with little fanfare.

THE CLC'S RECOMMENDATION ON THE *BROWN* DECISION

Pausing before offering the final recommendation, Miller acknowledged that there were those in the room who “feel with all sincerity and earnestness and with some conviction on their part that perhaps this should not be brought before the convention.” However, he recognized that this was an issue which could not be ignored, and thus the commission offered a recommendation on the recent *Brown* decision which affirmed its “harmony with the constitutional guarantee of equal freedom” and “with the Christian principles of equal justice and love for all men.” It urged Christians to conduct themselves with the “spirit of Christ” and that they would be part of the “progress of justice and brotherly love.” Finally, it called on pastors and leaders to use their position in moving toward a nation which was marked not by prejudices and bitterness, but rather freedom for all people.

After Miller moved that the meeting adopt the report and recommendations, a period of debate broke out among the messengers. One messenger speaking in opposition noted that he believed in emancipation, equality, and that the “Negro ought to have equal rights . . . But I do not believe the Bible teaches, and I do not believe that God approves, amalgamation of the races.” This messenger spoke

for many when he described the fear of racial interchange, especially the threat of intermarriage.

Equality may have been possible and even commendable in theory, but integration was a bridge too far, and likely sinful. Historian Russell Hawkins has noted that evangelicals often appealed to Scripture in their rejection of integration—whether through readings of Genesis and the Curse of Ham or even Acts 17:26, which states that God has determined the boundaries of nations beforehand. For those who opposed integration, these boundaries were racially segregated. Religion, for evangelicals such as this messenger from Kentucky, was not a tool for equality and justice, but rather was the weapon with which they made their call for segregation.

The final person to speak to the issue was Jesse Weatherspoon, a member of the commission and a professor of homiletics at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. He began by reminding the messengers that whether they removed the recommendation or not from the CLC's report, it would not change the actual situation facing them and the rest of the nation. To remove the recommendation and pretend that the Supreme Court had not ruled in favor of integration was to ignore the reality of the situation and to remove faith from the question. He ended his rebuttal of those who would remove the recommendation by saying that "if we withdraw this from our consideration tonight, we are saying to the United States of America, 'Count Baptists out in the matter of equal justice, and I do not believe we want to do that.'" The convention broke out in applause, and after a few votes and attempts to procedurally defeat the recommendation (all of which failed), the CLC's report was adopted, and Southern Baptists went on record as affirming the constitutionality of the *Brown* decision, even if in a contested environment.

RACIAL EQUALITY ADVOCACY, SCRUTINY, AND CP FUNDING

The advocacy of the CLC for racial equality did not begin in 1954, but it certainly came under greater scrutiny after that meeting. Through their regular publication, *Light*, the CLC provided moral guidance and information on the pressing moral and spiritual issues of the day. The pages of its early issues include numerous sermons advocating the need for integration and racial equality. There were condemnations of those who would erect walls of separation. Recognizing the importance of the current time, the July 1955 issue of the magazine urged Christians to not forego their responsibility in this moment under the pretext that this was merely a political question. In contrast to those who articulated this as merely a question of legality, constitutionality, or even timing and politics, the CLC recognized that there were deep moral and spiritual questions at play in answering the question "Am I a Man?" The question was being asked by culture, and the church could not afford to be silent.

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Many Southern Baptists wrote in to voice their alarm at the positions taken by the commission. There were frequent charges that the money offered to the group could be better spent on other issues, with not a few churches saying that they did not appreciate their tithes going to advance causes they thought were sinful. However, the commission's funding from the Cooperative Program was secure, and though they may not have received all that they requested each year, they did not lose their funding. Though Miller often wrote in his reports to other members that he desired more funding so that they could do more, he was always grateful for what they did have and that it was secure. While the members of the commission were committed to the cause of advancing racial justice, the security granted to the organization by the Cooperative Program allowed them to continue their work even in the face of criticism and sinful objections.

A benefit of the CLC being funded was that they could boldly offer a prophetic voice to the convention and remind them that Scripture is unequivocal in proclaiming the dignity and worth of every person, no matter their race or ethnicity. They were able to remind those in favor of segregation within the SBC, and the wider evangelical world, who read the end of Acts 17:26 about the boundaries set by God of the first half of the verse: "And he made from one man every nation of mankind." The segregationists may have been able to misread Scripture, but the CLC knew that the God of the Bible is the God of justice.

A LEGACY OF PERSEVERANCE

The events of 1954 were important and significant, but they were not unique in the history of the Christian Life Commission. Foy Valentine, who led the CLC beginning in 1960 and through much of the next three decades, was a tireless defender of civil rights. Richard Land, who assumed the presidency in 1988, would be instrumental in the crafting of the Resolution on Racial Reconciliation which marked the 150th anniversary of the Southern Baptist Convention, and which repudiated the racism that was instrumental in its founding. Russell Moore leading the ERLC in the 21st century, would work with other evangelicals to convene MLK50 which marked the 50th anniversary of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and urged evangelicals to work toward the vision he offered of racial unity and justice.

For each of these men, racism was a repudiation of the image of God and a threat to the humanity and worth of individuals. From its beginning, the CLC (and later, the ERLC) has advocated for the equality of every individual, recognizing that we are all made in the image of God. Like Weatherspoon in 1954, the ERLC continues to state clearly that Baptists ought not be counted out in the matter of equal justice.

Southern Baptists Before and After *Roe*

*Richard Land on the SBC's History of Abortion
Advocacy and the Future of the Pro-Life Movement*

BY JILL WAGGONER

RICHARD LAND SERVED AS the president of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission from 1988–2013. Prior to his time at the ERLC, he worked in a variety of church and political roles, many of which were involved closely with the modern pro-life movement in its earliest days. Below, he shares his experiences and brings perspective to the current cultural moment, the story of Southern Baptist involvement in the fight against abortion, and what comes next.

*Jill Waggoner: Historians have noted that before *Roe v. Wade*, evangelicals in general were fairly inactive on the issue of abortion. Is that true for Southern Baptists? If so, how did that change after *Roe*? What did it take to change Southern Baptists' mind on this issue?*

Richard Land: Abortion wasn't much of an issue for Southern Baptists until *Roe v. Wade*. Prior to 1970, the broad attitude was that the life issue was a "Catholic issue." There were a lot of prominent pastors who followed the teachings of Dr. W. O. Vaught at the time, and I think he influenced Dr. W. A. Criswell. They believed life began when God put breath into the body of Adam, and so they took the interpretation that personhood begins when you begin to breathe. So that alleviated them having to deal with abortion.

The real shift came in the aftermath of *Roe*. I was a foot soldier in the pro-life army back in the mid-1970s, organizing pro-life groups in churches when I was in Texas working at Criswell College. And I saw [the shift] happen. It was [a result of] the revulsion over the bloodshed. I don't think even the pro-choice people thought that abortions would jump the way they did once *Roe* was made the law

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of the land. That, and the amazing advances of embryology and sonograms—we knew a whole lot more about human development. I saw a ground shift among Southern Baptists.

At the time, the Christian Life Commission (the precursor to the ERLC) staff, including President Foy Valentine, were all pro-choice, as well as James Wood and James Dunn at the Baptist Joint Committee. Paul D. Simmons, who was radically pro-choice, was teaching ethics at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. That's when we got the 1971 pro-choice SBC resolution.

I was part of Southern Baptists for Life. It was clear by the mid-to-late 1970s that Southern Baptists had been awakened on the issue, and the majority of rank-and-file Southern Baptists were dissatisfied with the official position of the convention, which was the resolution.

The CLC staff opposed the 1982 resolution. They tried to amend it to make it more pro-choice, and they tried to put other exceptions in there besides the life of the mother. We had been pushing hard to get a Sanctity of Human Life Sunday on the denominational calendar. The CLC staff came into the subcommittee meetings of the Executive Committee and tried to stop it. And then when they realized they couldn't stop it, they tried to get it moved to another part of the year, away from January and away from abortion. Eventually, CLC President Larry Baker resigned.

In defense of the generation before me, a lot of their aversion to engaging the issue, as I mentioned above, was that they saw abortion as a "Catholic issue." They were dealing with the pre-Vatican II Catholic Church, which was not nearly as in favor of religious freedom and who didn't believe that Protestants were Christians. The kind of cooperation you see now between evangelicals and Catholics on the life issue wouldn't have been possible without Vatican II.

JW: The resolution that you have mentioned that was passed at the 1971 Annual Meeting in St. Louis called on Southern Baptists "to work for legislation that will allow the possibility of abortion under such conditions as rape, incest, clear evidence of severe fetal deformity, and carefully ascertained evidence of the likelihood of damage to the emotional, mental, and physical health of the mother." How should we understand that moment?

RL: It came about in 1971 because some states were making their abortion laws more liberal, as part of the feminist movement. To me, there's nothing more anti-woman than abortion, as the majority of babies aborted are female. Southern Baptists were beginning to think about the issue, and the pro-life movement was beginning to make headway into SBC life. The CLC wanted to head it off at the pass. They used that resolution to support the *Roe v. Wade* decision. They were anticipating the liberalization of abortion laws. They would file amicus briefs with this resolution as an attachment.

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JW: Looking ahead, what do you think is the next place for Southern Baptists to be concentrating their pro-life efforts, especially in a world where Roe may be overturned with the recent Supreme Court Case out of Mississippi?

RL: If the Supreme Court overturns *Roe*, that doesn't solve the issue. That just puts it into more of the political process. It's going to be a titanic struggle for hearts and minds.

The ERLC has two responsibilities. First, the ERLC is to be the conscience of the convention to call them to be where we believe they ought to be on moral issues and, in that regard, we call Southern Baptists to oppose abortion except to save the physical life of mother. The second responsibility is to represent Southern Baptist views to the Congress, to the president, to the Supreme Court, and to individuals. There we have to be as accurate as possible—descriptive, not prophetic. Southern Baptists are broadly pro-life, but there are disagreements on some of the troublesome exceptions.

JW: Gathering all your knowledge and experience, what do you think is going to come next? What are the next 20 years going to look like?

RL: I think Southern Baptists are going to remain pro-life. They understand that God is not a Republican or a Democrat, but he is pro-life. There was a reason that Jews were the only people in the Mediterranean basin who didn't practice infanticide. Their God, the one true God, had made it clear in the Scriptures that he's involved whenever conception takes place.

I recently read the testimonies of women in *The New York Times* about the impact of their abortions. What I would love to do is put a question mark beside their photo to say, "This is who their son or daughter would have become." They ignore the fact that we're talking about killing a human being. I think it is a symptom of the fact that our country has increasingly gone down the road of narcissism, which leads to self-adulation and self-idolatry.

Public policy is never static. The situation is either going to get a lot better or a lot worse. Pope John Paul II was right when he talked about a "culture of death." Because of legalized abortion-on-demand, we have seen the "culture of death" go from the womb to nursing home, to the ICU and to the nursery. Now we have states passing laws that say it's okay to kill a baby up until the time it is born. What's next? If a baby is just a collection of cells or an advanced mammal, then what stops people from killing a baby after he or she is born, because of a deformity? If you believe that every human life is sacred, you're going to contest that with everything you've got. Either we get more pro-life or we descend into more death.

This interview was edited for brevity and clarity.

Champions of Our First Freedom

The ERLC's Religious Liberty Advocacy for the Sake of the Gospel

IN 2016, SOUTHERN BAPTISTS did what they have always done when relying on their historic principles related to religious liberty as the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, along with the International Mission Board, signed an amicus brief defending the rights of Muslims to build a mosque.

When asked about the decision at the annual meeting later that year, then-President Russell Moore said that though there are many questions which are difficult, this was not one of them. He went on to clarify that the defense of people's religious liberty was the historic position of Baptists, and that a government which could limit the building of mosques would also be one that could limit the building of churches in various parts of the country.

Moore's defense of the rights of conscience is one that is part of the longer story of Southern Baptist public advocacy. Though the ERLC did not assume the task of defending religious liberty until the 1990s, Southern Baptists have consistently upheld the right of each person to worship in accordance with their conscience and live out their religious convictions.

A HISTORY OF SOUTHERN BAPTIST ADVOCACY FOR RELIGIOUS LIBERTY

In referencing the traditional positions of Baptists on religious liberty, Moore was referring to the long history of standing up for the rights of conscience. Religious liberty was for Baptists both a theological conviction and a practical necessity in their early years.¹ Early Baptists had been jailed, fined, and beaten for their rejection of the state church and nonconformity in England. When they arrived in America, they

¹ Joshua Wester, "John Locke's Social Contract Theory: A Baptists Assessment and Critique of Locke's Formulation for the Basis of Legitimate Political Authority," Th.M. thesis, (Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2021).

often fared little better with figures such as Roger Williams—who was Baptist for a time—being exiled by the Puritans of New England.

By the colonial era, Baptists were some of the strongest defenders of religious liberty, grounding it in the truth that no government could answer for an individual before the judgment seat of Christ. If it could not give an account for a person's soul, then it ought not to limit the free exercise of his or her religion. John Leland, who worked tirelessly for the advance of religion in Virginia, was even instrumental in ensuring that the Bill of Rights included the protection of religious freedom contained in the First Amendment.²

Standing outside the United States Capitol in 1920, Southern Baptist pastor George Truett declared that the “supreme contribution of the new world to the old is the contribution of religious liberty” and that it was “pre-eminently a Baptist contribution.”³ The long history of Baptists, and Baptists in America especially, is the story of the defense of the rights of conscience.

Some 60 years after George Truett's speech, Baptists had several boards and commissions working on matters of public policy and advocacy. There was the Christian Life Commission, which spoke to moral matters. There was also the Baptist Public Affairs Committee, which was tasked with defending religious liberty. Finally, Southern Baptists, through their representatives on the Public Affairs Committee, were part of the larger Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs which represented nine historic Baptist denominations in Washington on matters of common concern. As one historian has noted, Southern Baptists represented roughly one-third of the Joint Committee's members and provided over 90% of its funding.⁴

In the early 90s, the convention began the process of consolidating these various organizations. Eventually, in 1992, it ended the relationship between Southern Baptists and the Baptist Joint Committee, as well as dissolving the Public Affairs Committee and giving their ministry assignment to the Christian Life Commission, then led by Richard Land. In 1997, the organization received a new name—the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention—to reflect this new status as both a voice for moral issues and a defender of religious liberty.

RELIGIOUS LIBERTY THREATS AND OPPORTUNITIES

In the 21st century, the cause of religious liberty has been simultaneously at its strongest and most contested. The Supreme Court has mostly supported religious liberty protections by large (if not unanimous) majorities. Cases such as the unanimous *Hosanna Tabor* (2012), which protected churches and religious institutions from government

² Eric Smith, *John Leland: A Jeffersonian Baptist in Early America*, (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2022), 77.

³ George Truett, “Baptists and Religious Liberty”

⁴ Jerry Sutton, *A Matter of Conviction* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2008), 283-4.

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interference with their hiring practices, and the similarly decisive *Trinity Lutheran* (2017), which found that participation in government programs could not be denied to religious groups just because of their religious nature, have served as examples of the court's willingness to uphold the constitutional right to the free exercise of religion.

At the same time, the culture has increasingly come to see religious liberty as a means for oppression, with fights over sexuality being the major nexus of conflict. One failed presidential candidate unequivocally stated that churches and religious organizations that refuse to support same-sex marriage should be stripped of their tax-exempt status. The recent debate over the Equality Act, which poses a threat to religious institutions across the country for their holding to traditional sexual morality, is but the latest threat posed by a society that sees religious liberty, particularly that of conservative Christians, in conflict with the new sexual libertinism of the present.

Southern Baptists through the ERLC have consistently defended the nation's first freedom and asserted that the government should not overstep its authority and limit the religious expression of individuals. Through amicus briefs before the Supreme Court, meetings with elected officials, and the advocacy work accomplished by the Leland House staff (the ERLC's Washington, D.C., office named for the Baptist religious liberty firebrand John Leland), the ERLC has consistently asserted the Baptist commitment to the principle of religious liberty. The ERLC has also extended its advocacy beyond the United States through their special consultative status at the United Nations and advocacy for persecuted Christian minorities, as well as other minority religions, around the globe.

While the Constitution protects religious liberty, the need for Southern Baptist advocacy on this issue continues to be necessary. Through the giving of churches, the Southern Baptist Convention helps to further ensure that the right to worship is secured for all peoples. However, it is not just a matter of self-protection or pragmatism, but rather one grounded in theological commitment to the gospel.

As missionaries and church planters carry the gospel to their cities and the ends of the earth through the International Mission Board and North American Mission Board, the ERLC helps advocate for the freedom to evangelize and further the gospel through its defense of religious liberty. As the seminaries prepare future pastors who will join in the advance of the Kingdom's gospel work, the ERLC seeks to ensure that they are able to continue to teach in accordance with the rule of Scripture and the Baptist tradition.

The ERLC exists as the entity tasked with defending the rights of the other institutions of the Southern Baptist Convention to further the gospel through its advocacy before Congress and in the public square for the rights of conscience. While the future may bring new challenges to the doctrine of religious liberty, Southern Baptists have planted their flag firmly on the side of the authority of God and the limits of government, as well as the conviction that the gospel will advance through regeneration of hearts, not the threat of the sword.

New Question, the Same Message

The Gospel of Hope and Reconciliation in the Modern Public Square

ON APRIL 11, 2019, the ERLC released its *Artificial Intelligence: An Evangelical Statement of Principles*, which offered the first official faith-based declaration on the subject. The statement represented a new frontier for the organization and a recognition that the commitment to speak to the issues of the day required speaking to formerly unthinkable topics. However, though there were new topics, the message was the same: “As followers of Christ, we are called to engage the world around us with the unchanging gospel message of hope and reconciliation.” This is the same gospel message applied to a new, digital age.

The 21st century has offered new chances for Christians to engage the public square with the truths of the gospel. Debates on sexuality and marriage are common, especially after the 2015 *Obergefell* decision that legalized same-sex unions. The COVID-19 pandemic offered new challenges to churches seeking to love their neighbors and provide spiritual care for their members. And authoritarian nations such as China and Russia continue to abuse their citizens and to punish individuals for rights of conscience.

The need for an evangelical public witness is as pressing now as the early days of the Christian Life Commission (CLC). Southern Baptists continue to recognize that Christians must engage the culture around them with the truth of the gospel and live as salt and light. Though the ERLC continues to address the topics that have always been within its portfolio—racial justice, religious liberty, human dignity—the new moment also requires looking for how the moral demands of the gospel are applied in the face of novel ethical dilemmas.

THE NEW CONTEXT OF PRO-LIFE ADVOCACY

Evangelicals were slow to join the pro-life movement. As historian Daniel Williams has shown in his history of the movement, before the Supreme Court’s decision in *Roe v. Wade*, evangelicals were divided on the question, seeing it primarily as a Catholic

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issue.⁵ The Southern Baptist Convention was no different, even advancing resolutions at the annual meeting which allowed for “therapeutic abortions.”

However, with the shift inside the convention during the 1970s and 80s, along with grassroots mobilization of evangelicals in support of pro-life advocacy and politics, Southern Baptists have emerged as defenders of the preborn. The CLC under Richard Land, and the ERLC under Land and Russell Moore has served as a vocal defender of the truth that the preborn are image-bearers and possess inherent dignity. Through pro-life advocacy on Capitol Hill such as consistent calls to defund Planned Parenthood, reauthorize the Hyde Amendment, and passage of the Born Alive Protection Act, the ERLC has consistently advocated for an end to abortion and the death of the preborn.

At the same time, the ERLC has taken steps to not only create a world where abortion is illegal, but also unthinkable. Under the leadership of Elizabeth Graham, the ERLC has been able to extend their pro-life advocacy. The Road to Roe50 campaign, along with the increased number of ultrasound machines placed through the Psalm 139 Project, builds on traditional models of intervention in the lives of abortion-vulnerable women. At the same time, the team has advocated for policies that would make abortion unthinkable and worked with other pro-life organizations to combat the influence of Planned Parenthood domestically and internationally.

In 2021, the ERLC placed its first international ultrasound machine in Northern Ireland, which had legalized abortion in 2019. The ERLC, recognizing that Northern Ireland was facing a similar situation to that of America in 1973 with the *Roe* decision, has worked to help build and strengthen the pro-life community and prepare them in their work to uphold the worth and dignity of both lives.

INTERNATIONAL ADVOCACY FOR RIGHTS OF CONSCIENCE

The ERLC’s work defending human dignity is not just limited to pro-life advocacy. Through its Washington, D.C., office and advocacy before the United Nations, the ERLC has consistently sought to defend the rights of individuals around the globe, and protect international religious freedom. Recent work has included advocacy on behalf of the Uyghur people in China. Both an ethnic and religious group (most are practicing Muslims), they have faced intense persecution under the authoritarian government of the Chinese Communist Party. The ERLC, standing in line with the resolution passed at the 2021 Annual Meeting in Nashville, which declared the atrocities a genocide (the first religious denomination in the United States to do so), has worked with congressional members and other human rights organizations to bring awareness to this issue. The ERLC has done similar work in North Korea and Malaysia, advocating on behalf of Christians persecuted for their faith under authoritarian governments.

Through its D.C. staff in the Leland House, the ERLC has sought to advance the cause of rights of conscience globally. One way that this has occurred is through participation in annual reviews of countries for human rights abuses before the

United Nations. The ERLC holds consultative status at the UN, which allows it access to the various human rights mechanisms of the UN, and allows it to submit reviews of other countries human rights records. Through this process of review, the ERLC and other advocacy organizations have noted abuses by governments against religious minorities and Christians in an effort to seek reform and sanction.

Like their namesake, the Leland House staff seek to protect the rights of every individual to live out their religious convictions in a free society because the government will not answer for the individual at the judgment seat of Christ, and should therefore not interfere with religion in this life.

TECHNOLOGY & THE DIGITAL PUBLIC SQUARE

One more recent area of advocacy and equipping has been in the digital public square. With the rise of smartphones and an online landscape that is accessible at a moment's notice, Christians have faced new questions of how to think, use, and interact with technology. These questions range from the common but tragic proliferation of pornography to whether it is possible to have an entirely digital church. Virtual and augmented reality give rise to questions of embodiment, and the threat of censorship online raises the concern that Christian voices may be limited from the public square.

Recognizing that this new landscape poses unique challenges, the ERLC has intentionally sought to advance a biblical ethic grounded in love of God and love of neighbor. This was central to the statement on artificial intelligence released in 2019 which offered principles for Christian engagement with this new frontier. Similarly, the ERLC has worked to provide resources that address each of the questions mentioned above to help equip pastors and parents who are confronted with this rapidly evolving landscape. One coming project is the *Digital Public Square*, which seeks to provide an overview of the major issues in technology advocacy and policy today, and a Christian approach to the topics.

The work of the ERLC in the realm of technology ethics is a picture of the organization's role for the Southern Baptist Convention. Tasked with equipping churches on moral issues and advocating in the public square on those issues of importance for Southern Baptists, the new field of technology ethics serves as a window into how the organization seeks to do that in the face of new challenges.

Rather than bemoan a changing culture and withdraw from the public square, the ERLC continues to bring the same good news of redemption, reconciliation, and resurrection to the public square. That same message of the gospel's implications for life in the world shapes and informs the work that the ERLC does. And though new situations arise that bring new questions, the principles that inform the work the ERLC does have not changed.

Chelsea Sobolik and Hannah Daniel contributed to this chapter.

Appendix A: Timeline of Major Events in the History of the ERLC

- 1908** The SBC Committee on Temperance is formed with A.J. Barton as Chairman.
- 1913** The SBC establishes the Social Service Commission.
- 1914** A.J. Barton is elected as Chairman of the Social Service Commission (SSC).
- 1925** The SBC adopts the BFM (1925) and establishes the Cooperative Program.
- 1936** Committee on Public Relations, which will work with the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs, is established.
- 1942** Jesse Burton Weatherspoon replaces Barton as Chairman of the Social Service Commission.
- 1943** The SSC receives funds (\$1,000) from the SBC for the first time.
- 1947** Hugh Brimm elected as the first Secretary-Treasurer for the Social Service Commission
- 1948** The Social Service Commission begins to publish *Light*.
- 1953** Acker Miller becomes the Secretary-Treasurer for the Social Service Commission. The Commission is also renamed the Christian Life Commission (CLC).
- 1954** The CLC offers a recommendation affirming the Supreme Court's ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education*.
- 1960** Foy Valentine is elected to lead the Christian Life Commission.
- 1987** Larry Baker is elected to lead the Christian Life Commission.

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- 1988** Richard Land is elected Executive Director of the Christian Life Commission.
- 1990** The Christian Life Commission receives the program assignment previously held by the Baptist Joint Committee.
- 1994** Leland House, the CLC's Washington, D.C., office opens.
- 1995** The SBC adopts the "Resolution on Racial Reconciliation" on the 150th Anniversary of the Southern Baptist Convention.
- 1997** The CLC becomes the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission on June 19, 1997, and Richard Land offers the convention sermon at the SBC's annual meeting.
- 1998** The ERLC launches their website as a means of equipping the church as well as the radio show, "For Faith and Family."
- 1999** The ERLC launches its Research Institute.
- 2000** The SBC adopts the Baptist Faith and Message (2000).
- 2001** Richard Land is appointed by President Bush to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom.
- 2004** The ERLC places the first two ultrasound machines through its Psalm 139 Project in pregnancy resource centers in Indiana and Texas. Also, the organization launches its "iVoteValues" campaign to register voters and provide resources to compare the party platforms and candidate positions.
- 2007** Richard Land Center for Cultural Engagement founded at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary.
- 2009** Richard Land is an initial signatory of the Manhattan Declaration
- 2013** Russell Moore is elected as president of the ERLC.
- 2014** The ERLC hosts their first national conference in Nashville, Tennessee, on "The Gospel, Homosexuality and the Future of Marriage."
- 2016** The ERLC hosts the first Evangelicals for Life in conjunction with the March for Life in Washington, D.C.
- 2018** The ERLC hosts the MLK50 Conference with The Gospel Coalition marking the 50th anniversary of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.
- 2019** The ERLC releases *Artificial Intelligence: An Evangelical Statement of Principles*. It is the first faith statement of principles on the subject.

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- 2020** The ERLC releases the Caring Well Initiative to equip churches in preventing and responding to sexual abuse.
- 2021** The ERLC announces their Road to Roe50 campaign to place 50 ultrasound machines before the 50th anniversary of *Roe v. Wade* in 2023.

*This timeline is adapted from Jerry Sutton's *A Matter of Conviction: A History of Southern Baptist Engagement with the Culture* (B&H Publishing, 2008).*

Appendix B: A Visual History of the ERLC



Foy Valentine: Executive Secretary of the Christian Life Commission, 1960-1987

Acker Calvin Miller: Executive Secretary of the Christian Life Commission, 1953-1960

Hugh Alexander Brimm: Executive Secretary of the Social Service Commission, 1947-1952

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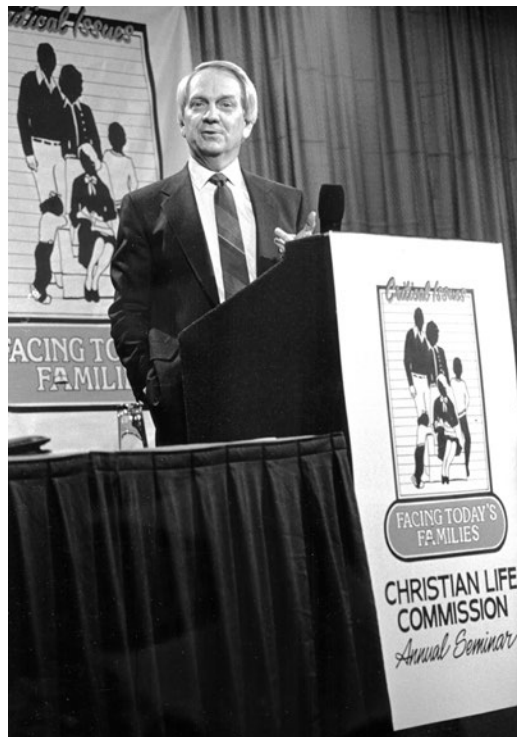


Three Southern Baptist leaders meet with reporters to introduce a proposed resolution on racial reconciliation June 19, 1995, the day before the opening of the Southern Baptist Convention annual meeting in Atlanta's Georgia Dome. Left to right are: Gary Frost, SBC second vice president and pastor of Rising Star Baptist Church in Youngstown, Ohio; Charles Carter, chairman of the SBC Resolutions Committee and pastor of Shades Mountain Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama; and Richard Land, executive director of the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission.

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A.C. Miller speaks on the dangers of the liquor traffic, a common issue in the early years of the Commission and one of its early ministry assignments.



Larry Baker: Executive Secretary of the Christian Life Commission, 1987-1988

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Billy Graham receives the Distinguished Service Award from Foy Valentine in 1983. Graham received the award for a second time in 2007 when it was renamed the Richard D. Land Distinguished Service Award.



President Lyndon B. Johnson speaking at the Christian Life Commission "Citizenship" seminar, at the White House Rose Garden, March 25, 1964.

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Richard Land speaking at the Baptist World Alliance Conference Against Racism, Ebenezer Baptist Church, Atlanta, Georgia, January, 1999.



Registrants at Christian Citizenship (1976), a national seminar sponsored by the Christian Life Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, stand on the west steps of the U.S. Capitol during the closing session to read a "covenant of commitment to the Christian citizenship." C. Welton Gaddy, director of Christian Citizenship development for the Commission, led the covenant and closed the meeting with prayer for the nation.

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Russell Moore speaks at the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission's MLK50 Conference in Memphis, Tennessee, on April 3, 2018.



Benjamin and Kirsten Watson joined Russell Moore at the dedication of a new ultrasound machine at Baptist Community Health Services (BCHS) in New Orleans. The Watsons donated the ultrasound machine through the Psalm 139 Project, the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission's ministry to help place such technology in pregnancy resource centers.

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Brent Leatherwood, acting president of the ERLC, joins executive director Debbie Chandler and Whitney Layne, RN and Nurse Manager of Next Step Resources Center in Dunlap, Tennessee, for an ultrasound dedication through the Psalm 139 Project. The Psalm 139 Project is a ministry of the ERLC and helps provide ultrasound machines to pregnancy centers and train staff members in its use.



Brent Leatherwood, acting president of the ERLC, policy associate Hannah Daniel, and Elizabeth Graham, vice president for operations and life initiatives, gather at the U.S. Supreme Court during the oral arguments for the Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health.

All photos were provided by the Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives, Nashville, Tennessee, with the exception of photos from 2017–2022, which were provided by the ERLC's photo archives.

About the Contributors

Alex Ward serves as Lead Researcher for the ERLC. He assists with the oversight of the Research Institute under the leadership of the Director of Research. Additionally, he serves as an Associate Editor for the organization. Alex is currently pursuing a PhD in History at the University of Mississippi studying evangelical political activity in the 20th century. He holds a Master of Theology in church history from The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, a Master of Theological Studies from Vanderbilt Divinity School, and a Bachelor of Arts in English and Philosophy from Mississippi State University. He is married to Lindsey and they have one daughter.

Brent Leatherwood currently serves as Acting President of the ERLC, as well as Vice President of External Affairs and Chief of Staff. Before coming to the ERLC, he served as the executive director of the Tennessee Republican Party from December 2012 to December 2016, where he managed the organization's campaign apparatus at the federal, state and local levels. He also worked on Capitol Hill as a senior legislative aide to former Rep. Connie Mack, R-Fla. Brent and his wife Meredith have three children and are members of The Church at Avenue South, where Brent serves as a deacon.

Hannah Daniel serves as a Policy Associate in the Washington, D.C. office. She graduated with a degree in Economics from Union University. She lives in Washington, D.C., and is a member of King's Church.

Chelsea Sobolik serves as the Director of Public Policy with the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission in the Washington, D.C. office. Previously, she worked on Capitol Hill on pro-life policies, domestic and international religious freedom, adoption, and foster care issues. Chelsea has been published at the Wall Street Journal, USA Today, The Gospel Coalition, Christianity Today, and others. She is the author of *Longing for Motherhood—Holding onto Hope in the Midst of Childlessness*, and a forthcoming book on women and work. She has a B.A. in International Relations from Liberty University, and lives in Washington, D.C., with her husband Michael.

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Jill Waggoner serves as Content Editor, writing and developing content for the organization's online and print resources, as well as assisting with public relations. She has served the ERLC since 2005 primarily in the areas of PR and marketing, as well as serving as Brand Manager for Global Hunger Relief from 2014-2018. A graduate of Union University, she and her family reside in Lebanon, Tenn., where her husband Brandt serves as lead pastor of Fairview Church. She and Brandt have three sons.



Leland House Press is an initiative from the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission. Leland House Press exists to equip and educate the local church about ethical and religious liberty issues through the publication of various eBooks and booklets.

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