

Richard Land loses show, keeps his leadership job

by [David Gibson](#) in the [June 27, 2012](#) issue

A top Southern Baptist official who was accused of plagiarism in a radio segment claiming that civil rights leaders and President Obama used the Trayvon Martin case to stir racial tensions has lost his weekly call-in program but can keep his main job, a church panel has announced.

Richard Land, the influential head of the Southern Baptist Convention's Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission and the denomination's top policy spokesman, was rebuked for racial insensitivity and for not attributing the source of his radio commentaries after a review by ERLC trustees.

The controversy over Land's explosive remarks in a March 31 radio program was especially awkward as Southern Baptists were expected to elect an African-American pastor, Fred Luter, as the denomination's first black president this month.

The investigators chided Land for "his hurtful, irresponsible, insensitive and racially charged words" in a broadcast of the *Richard Land Live!* show in which he accused Obama and black civil rights activists such as Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton of using the Trayvon Martin shooting to foment racial strife and boost the president's reelection chances.

Martin is the 17-year-old unarmed black youth who was shot to death in February by a neighborhood watch volunteer in Sanford, Florida. Martin was walking back to his father's house with a bag of candy and an iced tea when he was confronted by George Zimmerman, who was patrolling the gated community where Martin was staying. Zimmerman is awaiting trial on second-degree murder charges that were filed after a public outcry led authorities to investigate the case.

Land initially dismissed criticism of the racial tenor of his comments, but two weeks later it emerged that his comments were lifted from a *Washington Times* column without attribution. Faced with a growing outcry, Land issued an apology for the

Martin comments, and Southern Baptist leaders announced they would launch an investigation.

It is not clear whether the SBC findings announced June 1 will calm the storm.

Ten days before, the head of the five-member investigating committee resigned, reportedly to spend more time volunteering for his church. His replacement immediately expressed support for Land and a desire to see him continue “his ministry.” In the findings, trustees said that the “content and purpose” of Land’s radio program were “not congruent with the mission of the ERLC” and that it would be terminated as soon as the broadcast contract allowed.

However, the trustees also said that in reading material without attribution, Land was “accepting practices that occur in the radio industry,” albeit “unwisely.” They praised Land for his apologies and said he “exhibited a very compliant spirit and was fully cooperative during the investigation.”

“Damage was done to the state of race relations in the Southern Baptist Convention,” the investigating committee said. “We recognize that there is more work to do before the members of Southern Baptist congregations are as diverse as the citizens of our great nation. We and Dr. Land remain dedicated to that cause.”

For his part, Land said that the review “was conducted in a Christian manner by Christian gentlemen” and that he looked forward to continuing with his work as ERLC head.

Whether Land’s reprimand and Luter’s impending election can change the racial dynamics for the SBC is uncertain. A number of Baptist leaders and experts noted that Land is a veritable institution in the SBC and that Luter will serve as president for no more than two years—hardly enough time to give him the kind of visibility and influence that Land enjoys.

Luter initially called Land’s radio remarks “unhelpful” but later added, “I don’t think you should throw out a lifetime of doing good because of one mistake.” —RNS