

Southern Baptist leader Richard Land to retire after ethics probe

by [Adelle M. Banks](#)

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c. 2012 Religion News Service (RNS) Richard Land, the man who became the public face of the Southern Baptist Convention on ethical and political issues for nearly 25 years, has announced plans to retire in 2013 after a rough-and-tumble spring.

The decision comes months after Land, president of the SBC's Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission, made controversial comments about the Trayvon Martin case that resulted in a reprimand and the loss of his radio talk show for the racial tension they caused.

Land, 65, said in a Tuesday (July 31) letter announcing his retirement that he has no intention of ending his role as a culture warrior.

"I believe the 'culture war' is a titanic spiritual struggle for our nation's soul and as a minister of Christ's Gospel, I have no right to retire from that struggle," Land wrote in a two-page letter to the acting chairman of his commission.

The Rev. Fred Luter, who was elected in June as the SBC's first African-American president, said he doesn't believe Land was forced out by church leaders. "If there was a time they wanted to force him out, it would have been when they made their decision," Luter said Wednesday, referring to the June reprimand by the commission's executive committee.

Rather, Luter considers the Martin remarks a "low moment" that should not diminish Land's commitment to racial reconciliation, especially the 1995 SBC resolution the two men worked on apologizing for Southern Baptists' support of slavery during the Civil War era.

"Richard was very passionate in those meetings about the fact that we do not just want this to be a piece of paper, a resolution; we want it to mean something," Luter recalled of their work together. "I will always remember him as a man who was a

major voice in our convention desiring that people would be treated fairly regardless of their race."

Critics suspect that Land's departure was expedited by his controversial comments about the case involving the unarmed Florida teen who was killed by a neighborhood watch volunteer.

"Despite Land's best efforts to spin his retirement, he's not going out on top," wrote Josh Glasstetter on People for the American Way's "Right Wing Watch" blog. "After two decades of pushing divisive, hard-right politics and making inflammatory remarks, he finally went too far."

Bill Leonard, chair of Baptist studies at Wake Forest University Divinity School, said from a historical perspective, "the Trayvon Martin situation should not be seen as the defining moment for Land on race."

Nonetheless, Leonard said Land's retirement signals a changing of the guard in the nation's largest Protestant body, which is struggling to reach nonwhites and non-Southerners as it faces a declining membership.

"You have to wonder if there is -- inside the new, the younger leadership of the convention -- a concern that his style of very aggressive, very public responses is something the convention wants to perpetuate," Leonard said, adding that Land "replaced Jerry Falwell" as the media's go-to voice for conservative evangelicals.

ERLC acting chairman Richard Piles called Land's departure "bittersweet," and thanked Land for his "exemplary" service.

"He is to be applauded for his tireless work for racial reconciliation, the pro-life movement, and traditional marriage, just to name a few of the more well-known issues he has championed," Piles said.

Land, an author who received his doctorate from Oxford University, will have been president of the commission for 25 years on his planned retirement date of October 23, 2013.

Both he and Piles declined comment beyond their statements.