

Southern Baptists get a new face on public policy

by [Adelle M. Banks](#) in the [June 26, 2013](#) issue

In a generational changing of the guard, Southern Baptists are gaining a new advocate for their values in Washington and around the country as Russell Moore, a media-savvy theologian, takes the helm of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission. The ERLC is the public policy arm for the Southern Baptist Convention.

Moore is taking over from Richard Land, who has headed the ERLC since 1988 and used it as a platform to rally social conservatives in the nation's culture wars. Like Land, Moore is an abortion opponent, a believer in an errorless Bible and a fan of Coke Zero.

It's clear that Moore, age 41, is part of a new era. While Land, now 66, has been computer-averse, Moore is a frequent blogger and sometimes tweets more than a dozen times a day. Moore, a Mississippi native, is a fan of country music and Christian hip-hop; Land, a sixth-generation Texan, favors Elvis and the Beatles.

R. Albert Mohler Jr., president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, said Moore—who had been head of the seminary's theology school—is “unabashedly committed to the same convictions” as Land but uses newer cultural skills—including Twitter.

“It's the difference between *Mad Men* and *The Office*,” said Mohler, who has known Land for 30 years and Moore, a Southern Seminary alumnus, for at least half as long.

Land, for his part, said he has no plans to join the Twitterverse, but he does have a copy of *iPad for Dummies* and will teach an online class in his new job as the head of Southern Evangelical Seminary near Charlotte, North Carolina.

While the audience is different—the interdenominational seminary has just 350 resident and online students—Land's mission will be much the same as he aims to create, in his words, “green berets and paratroopers of God's army.”

The difference in language and tone between the two men is significant.

Citing Jesus' "calm tranquility," Moore likes to speak of the need to defend Southern Baptist ideals by using "convictional kindness" rather than the stern moralism that propelled the previous Moral Majority generation.

"Jesus is convictional," Moore said in an interview as he began to adjust to his Washington office just off Capitol Hill. (He officially started June 1 and will split time between Washington and Nashville, Tennessee.) "He speaks clearly about sin, righteousness and judgment, but Jesus is not panicked or outraged."

Moore, who was registered as an independent in Kentucky but admired former president George W. Bush's "compassionate conservatism," supports what he calls "engaged communitarianism"—a middle ground between the evangelical extremes of triumphalism and cultural separation.

Interviewed before the Supreme Court ruling in June on same-sex marriage, Moore believes evangelicals need to rethink marriage by affirming the roles of men and women and moving away from the notion of clergy as the "marrying parson" who willingly weds "unbelievers."

"The church is not some sort of justice of the peace with a prayer book," he said.

Jonathan Akin, a director of Baptist21, a group of younger Southern Baptists, hopes Moore will expand the agency's portfolio to address issues like adoption, justice, poverty and sex trafficking. Adoption is already something of a personal crusade for Moore, the father of five sons, including two adopted from Russia.

"He's going to help the church think through issues that the church doesn't usually stop and think through," said Akin.

David Key, director of Baptist studies at Emory University's Candler School of Theology, said he expects Moore to engage people with whom he disagrees.

"Richard [Land] came of age during the time the religious right was at its strength; Russell [Moore] is coming at a time when the religious right is at its weakness," said Key, a Facebook friend of Moore's who calls himself a "dissenting Southern Baptist." "Russell cannot be as combative as Richard was because Southern Baptists are in a decline at the moment."

Land said the ethics job deals with the personal as well as the political. He once took a call from a pastor visiting the ailing pregnant wife of his head deacon in the emergency room. If she kept the baby, she'd lose her life, the doctor told them. Land advised: "It's permissible to take life in defense of life."

Fred Luter, who was elected as the SBC's first African-American president last year, said he was concerned when Land announced his retirement: "One thing about Richard: you never had to guess what he stood for." But he's pleased with the selection of Moore, who was one of the earliest supporters of Luter's historic presidency. —RNS

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