

Prominent SBC leader charged with lewd act: Executive committee member resigns

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A prominent Oklahoma minister and member of the Southern Baptist Convention's executive committee was charged January 11 with offering to engage in a lewd act.

Lonnie Latham, 60, resigned as pastor of the 1,500-member South Tulsa Baptist Church and as a member of the denomination's top administrative body two days after he was arrested and jailed January 3. He was alleged to have invited a male undercover Oklahoma City police officer to his hotel room for sex.

The minister was a backer of the SBC's multifront opposition to homosexuality, including efforts to convince gays to "accept Jesus Christ as their savior and reject their sinful, destructive lifestyle."

The reports drew expressions of shock and grief from some fellow Southern Baptists, but also prompted an official of the American Civil Liberties Union to express sympathy for the clergyman.

Latham's attorney Mack Martin said, "We will carefully review the charges filed, to see if there's any validity to them. Even if everything the DA says is true, I don't know if that's a crime." Latham said he was advised not to discuss the case. If convicted, he could face 30 days to one year in jail, a fine of up to \$2,500, and 40 to 80 hours of community service.

Oklahoma County district attorney Wes Lane said Oklahoma law prohibits a person from "soliciting another person to engage in what is considered a lewd act regardless of whether money is sought or exchanged."

The ACLU Oklahoma Foundation's executive director, Joann Bell, said Latham should never have been arrested because the U.S. Supreme Court has established that same-sex sexual relations are legal if they are adult, consensual, private and

noncommercial.

“If you follow the logic of the Oklahoma City police, everyone who tries to pick up someone at a bar is a criminal,” she said.

Morris H. Chapman, president and CEO of the SBC’s executive committee, said in a statement to Baptist Press that Latham was held accountable “to a biblical standard of morality” in submitting his resignations. “We pray for complete rehabilitation,” said Chapman, who also lamented the opportunity for critics “to mock the Christian heritage to which Lonnie has testified through the years.”