

# Governance Update

December 12, 2024

## Introduction

Many members of Second Baptist Church have voiced concerns about the bylaw changes implemented on May 31, 2023. The change in the bylaws have prompted several developments, including the elimination of independent oversight of the governance process. Additionally, there has been no substantive effort to inform or involve the congregation in critical matters such as bylaw changes or addressing the concerns raised by members.

## History

On May 19, 2023, at 5:01 pm CDT, the church sent out its regular weekly automated newsletter to members. This email (attached) which was as a routine update titled "This Weekend at Second – May 20/21", contained a subtle yet profound notice about an upcoming event. Among the announcements about Bible study and summer activities, a brief one-line sentence revealed that a Church Business Meeting was scheduled for May 31, 2023, at the Woodway campus, to "update the bylaws to protect our ability to continue operating as a biblical church".

The notice did not provide any specifics about the significance, or the changes being proposed or other information about why they were necessary. By placing this notice between lighthearted updates about summer activities and general encouragement for weekend worship, the meeting date and the significance of the bylaw changes could easily be overlooked. The outcome of the "notice" to the church membership was that only a fraction of non-staff church members attended - approximately 0.5%, or one-half of one percent, based on the estimated church membership of 94,500.

- **The Meeting** - During the meeting, there was a presentation of the proposed changes made by various church leaders, along with our senior pastor Dr. H. Edwin Young. All framed the need to update our bylaws as necessary because "they were outdated" and to "keep woke ideology out of the church."
- **Lack of Transparency** - The existing bylaws and the proposed new by-laws were not made available for members to review, inspect in advance, or read during the meeting. No presenter read the new by-laws to those members in attendance.
- **Lack of Informed Consent** – Though those few members were not given anything in writing, nor did any presenter read the old or new by-laws to them, members were asked to vote to approve the updated bylaws. Key details of what they were asked to approve (and did so approve) were not discussed, such as forever removing our member's right to vote on anything, the elimination of the pastoral search committee and granted total authority to the senior pastor to appoint the next successor senior pastor. Notably, the effect was the immediate removal of independent guard rails and governance, putting the church's financial and real property assets under the control of one individual, the senior pastor.

## Pastoral Transition

In May 2024, H. Edwin Young, after 46 years as senior pastor of Second Baptist Church, announced in a Sunday sermon, his decision to transition as "stepping up, not stepping down" as senior pastor, underscoring his desire to focus more on personal evangelism and special projects at Second Baptist Church, albeit in a different capacity. He also announced that his successor would be his 61-year-old son Ben Young, an ordained pastor with preaching experience and a Ph.D. in theology.

The transition in senior pastors from H. Edwin Young to Ben Young, took place without a formal pastor search committee, no congregational input, and no independent oversight of the process. Many church members questioned whether the bylaw changes that occurred in 2023, had been orchestrated to ensure and facilitate the transition of the senior pastor from the father to the son.

## The Bylaw Changes

In the summer of 2024, a group of members became aware of the change to the by-laws and began to educate themselves about the implications of the 2023 bylaw changes. Those changes included:

- **Loss of Voting Rights:** The few members who voted in favor to pass the new bylaws either “unknowingly or unwittingly” approved the elimination of all future congregational voting rights. Said another way, voting “Yes” for the bylaw change in 2023, was the last vote any member of Second Baptist Church would ever cast.
- **Pastoral Succession:** The process for selecting a new senior pastor was eliminated. The pastor search committee previously responsible for vetting candidates was removed entirely. The authority to choose the next senior pastor now rests solely with the current senior pastor.
- **Unlimited Pastoral Authority:** The new bylaws grant the senior pastor unchecked authority over the church, effectively removing independent oversight mechanisms. There is a Ministry Leadership Team (“MLT”), one could point to as having some oversight, but this group is appointed by the senior pastor and serves at his discretion. Importantly, the members of the “MLT”, include the senior pastor, his younger brother, his older brother’s lawyer, his cousin, and a senior staff member that reports directly to the senior pastor.
- **Lack of Independent Oversight:** Centralizing power in the hands of a single individual, specifically the senior pastor, combined with the Ministry Leadership Team comprised of family, friends, and staff, is far from independent oversight.

The previously mentioned group of concerned members initial objectives were as follows:

- 1) **Gather Comprehensive Information:** The concerned members sought first to understand exactly how and what changes were adopted in the May 31, 2023, business meeting.
- 2) **Assess acceptability:** Determine whether the new bylaws aligned with our church’s values and governing principles that have been in place since Second Baptist Church’s founding in 1927, almost 100 years ago.
- 3) **Explore further action:** If the process of making changes to the bylaws, or the changes themselves, raise concerns, then identify appropriate steps to address the issues.

The group determined that the most logical next step would be to engage in a conversation directly with the new senior pastor.

To initiate the dialogue, the group selected one of the church’s most respected members to meet with the senior pastor one-on-one. The group’s delegate was Jack Little, the long-standing chairman of the Pastor’s Prayer Team, known to and respected by so many church members.

During their 45-minute discussion, Jack used the example of the collapse and failure of a major public energy company in Houston, attributing its failure to a lack of proper oversight and governance. He drew a parallel to the potential risks to our church under the new bylaws, which eliminated independent oversight. Ben Young listened respectfully, took detailed notes, and appeared engaged as Jack presented a thoughtful case for reinstating the original bylaws to restore independent governance and safeguards.

At the conclusion of the meeting, Jack emphasized that there was no need for an immediate decision. He encouraged the senior pastor to take the necessary time to consider the concerns and revisit the discussion in the coming weeks. However, the senior pastor responded unreservedly, stating that he did not need additional time to reflect and had no intention of amending the bylaws. The meeting ended on that note.

After being told of the senior pastor’s stance that he would not take any action to change the bylaws, it was decided the next step should be to draft a letter to Ben Young, outlining in detail the concern regarding the lack of an independent governing board for our church.

It must be understood that the objective of the lay leaders was not an objection to Ben Young serving as senior pastor. The entire concern was and is, the lack of an independent board to provide oversight of the administration of the church, its finances, and its future.

### **Letter to Pastor Ben Young**

The letter described above dated September 4, 2024 (attached hereto), was hand-delivered to the senior pastor, along with separate copies for his executive leadership team and the ministry leadership team. However, our understanding is those copies were never distributed by our senior pastor to the other intended recipients.

It is worth noting that the letter dated September 4, 2024, would not have been necessary, had the senior pastor shown some willingness to review the situation, consult his leadership team, and pray about the concern, regardless of whether he truly intended to make any changes. This letter emphasized the need to revisit the changes to the bylaws stressing the importance of transparency, accountability, and independent oversight, as the bare minimums for proper church governance. Initially signed by 35 members, the letter now has over 150 signatures of both men and women members.

The response from the senior church staff has been disappointing. Many individuals and groups of deacons have requested meetings with staff or have met with our church administrator to discuss their concerns and the issues. The staff response has ranged from full denial of the concerns raised, trivializing member concerns and even characterizing those troubled by what is taking place as merely “disgruntled older members” that are either resistant to change, dissatisfied with the new pastor, or unhappy with other aspects such as the worship service format or music program.

Staff members have gone as far to suggest, that the members asking the questions “might do better by finding another place to worship.” The issue is not merely age-related concerns, it is fundamental to ensuring that our church has the appropriate financial guardrails and is governed in a way that honors The Lord and reflects His Will in all aspects of our mission, leadership and decision making.

### **The Fallout**

Disregarding the concerns of long-serving members who have provided decades of prayer, faithful service, and substantial financial support, while implying they should find another church if they are not happy with the current situation, has left otherwise long-time faithful members deeply troubled by the change in attitude exhibited by the staff, church administrator and the lack of response from the senior pastor.

The long-term implications of centralized authority in any one person without independent oversight, creates an environment that is neither sustainable nor aligned with the principles of accountability and shared governance that define a God-centered organization.

### **Lack of Access**

The adoption of the new bylaws has understandably caused significant concern among deacons and members, many of which have requested copies of both the old and new bylaws to better understand what has changed. However, the senior church administrator has imposed restrictions allowing church members to view the bylaws, only under supervision in the church office and has prohibited members from taking copies. These restrictions are problematic in that members and deacons cannot easily review the “how, what and why” of the modifications that were made to our church’s bylaws.

The lack of access approach is in stark contrast to the practices of other churches. For example, Houston’s First Baptist Church publishes its bylaws along with the redlined versions showing modifications openly on their website. Such transparency fosters trust and accountability.

## **Summary**

The primary purpose of this overview is to provide a brief update of the significant changes that have taken place in our church over the past 18 months. We have included PDF copies of the correspondence sent to our senior pastor, as well as a fully signed version of the letter dated September 4<sup>th</sup>, 2024, so that you can see the names of your fellow church members who have joined you in going on the record by signing the letter to our pastor.

We deeply appreciate your love of our church and your heartfelt commitment to standing up for what honors The Lord.

We encourage you to share your thoughts directly with our senior pastor, senior church staff, deacons, Bible study teachers, and lay leadership.

Written with love and faithfulness,

*Your Brothers and Sisters in Christ*