

Editorial: A welcoming way ahead for Texas Baptists

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The compassionate ministry of hundreds of Texas Baptist pastors provides a model for how the Baptist General Convention of Texas should handle the looming crisis concerning its relationship with churches that welcome and affirm LGBT members.



Marv KnoxA letter from three BGCT leaders to First Baptist Church in Austin and Wilshire Baptist Church in Dallas precipitated the situation. The letter warned the churches an affirming stance toward LGBT members would place them outside the bounds of “harmonious cooperation” with the convention.

(You can read about the letter and the churches’ response [by clicking here.](#))

Escalation factors

At least four factors will cause the crisis to escalate:

- Although the BGCT leaders acted upon precedent, their letter seems to conflict with the convention’s bylaws. Most specifically, it denies due process and narrows the decision-making scope to three individuals rather than the convention at-large or its Executive Board.

- First Baptist in Austin shares a long and colorful history with the BGCT, and Wilshire has been one of the convention's most-involved congregations for 65 years.
- Many Texas Baptists instinctively agree with the leaders' decision to remove churches that affirm homosexual practice, and they want the convention to take a strong stand.
- But many do not—either because they disagree with the judgment against LGBT relationships or they feel the action violates Baptists' long-cherished principle of local-church autonomy.

What next?

Where do we go from here? Why not follow the strong ministry principle and practice of hundreds of wise, loving pastors across the state?

The vast majority of these pastors and their congregations never will affirm homosexual activity. They never will perform same-sex weddings, or ordain gays and lesbians, or publicly dedicate the children of same-sex couples.

But they recognize the beautiful, divine stamp of God upon every soul. They love and care for people, all people. And they especially have a soft spot in their hearts for people who, like gays and lesbians, feel condemned and rejected by “good” folks. These pastors want their churches to be places of safety and welcome and refuge for LGBT persons. These pastors want them to know they are loved in the name of Jesus.

Discussing the letter to Wilshire and First Austin, BGCT Executive Director David Hardage recognized the validity of welcoming pastors and their churches: “I believe a church can be welcoming but not affirming,” he said, explaining his belief churches can welcome people regardless of sexual orientation but maintain a traditional understanding of marriage and sexual ethics. “I believe that is not only possible, but also biblical. ...”

Extend grace

So, why can't the BGCT extend the same grace to these congregations that loving pastors extend to members and seekers in their midst?

Why can't the BGCT welcome all churches that wish to affiliate with and support the work of the convention, even if the convention at-large does not agree with all of those churches' beliefs or practices?

The convention need not condone homosexual activity—or congregations' affirmation of LGBT issues—in order to maintain “harmonious cooperation” with churches that do.

We don't have to split over this, and we don't have to keep on kicking churches out.

The BGCT can clearly and continually delineate its historic position, affirmed by multiple resolutions, that homosexual relationships are outside the bounds of God's will. But it can continue to work in missions and ministry and other partnership endeavors with congregations that intentionally and respectfully disagree.

If that's a step too far, the convention could create a watch care arrangement—suggested by Wilshire Pastor George Mason—that would make these churches fraternal partners if not full members of the convention. Then, the churches could continue supporting the convention and participating in ministries and partnerships, perhaps without votes at the annual meeting and church members' involvement as formal leaders.

Testimony of love

This would enable the BGCT to cast a big tent for engagement in missions and ministry. It would provide a testimony of love and goodwill, demonstrating Texas Baptists know how to work together and do not

demand rigid uniformity in order to practice robust partnership.

It also would enable the BGCT to continue to champion the cause of local-church autonomy. That principle is based upon Baptists' affirmation of the priesthood of all believers—the notion each Christian is both free *and responsible* to go directly to God when seeking divine will. Local-church autonomy is its corollary, assuming a congregation of free believers likewise should be free of external influence when it makes its decisions.

Texas Baptists championed the priesthood of all believers and local-church autonomy throughout the battle for the Southern Baptist Convention a generation ago. Texas Baptists' strong belief in those principles explains why they did not walk in lockstep with the people who took over the SBC and who violated individual priesthood and church autonomy. Forsaking those principles now would be a travesty.

But welcoming all churches—even when the vast majority of Texas Baptists do not and will not affirm the LGBT lifestyle—can uphold local-church autonomy and provide a path toward “harmonious cooperation” with all churches that wish to participate in the life of the convention.

Editor's Note: Two members of the Baptist Standard board are members of Wilshire Baptist Church.

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